



Bergson's Philosophy of Self-Overcoming

Thinking without Negativity or Time as Striving

Messay Kebede

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Among philosophies qualified as great, Bergsonism is probably the philosophy that shows the least settled fate. After enjoying wide national and international popularity at the turn of the twentieth century, its influence reaching, beyond the philosophical field, to scientists, artists, and theologians, it became the target of sustained criticisms from different philosophical circles. The criticisms emanated from such various sources as phenomenologist and existential thinkers, neo-Marxist, positivist, and neo-Kantian schools, as well as Catholic scholars. These criticisms were all the more amplified as they drew on the authority of prominent and popular thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russel, Jacques Maritain, Gaston Bachelard, Georges Politzer, and others, who wrote targeted essays denouncing Bergsonism. These writings exposed the irrational inspiration of the philosophy and tied it to the other alleged defaults of Bergsonism, such as social conservatism, anti-science stand, mystic ramblings, vitalist credo, etc. The criticisms were so ferocious that they precipitated the whole philosophy into what one author does not hesitate to depict as “philosophical obsolescence.”¹ Most remarkable, though, is that the decline of the philosophy is progressively coming to an end, as evidenced by the recent “increasing interest in Bergsonian philosophy” and “the rising tide of essays, books, courses and conferences” devoted to it.² The scholars who are instrumental in this resurgence all suggest that Henri Bergson’s eclipse was caused by readings that failed to pay attention to the originality of the work, perhaps because he resented the use of an esoteric lexicon.

The proof is that Gilles Deleuze, the philosopher who contributed most to the revival of Bergsonism, did nothing else but disclose how Bergson's thinking imparts to traditional concepts new and groundbreaking directions. To the impact of misreading, one must add the provocative side of Bergsonism. Indeed, the philosophy touches on subjects that usually are taboos for philosophers because they categorize them as manifestations of irrationality, such as intuitive knowledge, mysticism, and psychical research. As a result, everything looks as though irrationality, far from being an allegation, is defiantly claimed by Bergson himself.

This study hopes to contribute to Bergson's revival by providing a perspective that gives an insight into the originality and strength of his work. It rests on the central thesis that Bergson's notion of time, that is, time as duration, is the other name for a conception of being as self-overcoming. The provided perspective does not adhere to the order of invention by following the sequence of publication of Bergson's books. Rather, it demonstrates the centrality of the notion of self-overcoming by using the method of logical derivation. It thus shows that all Bergson's basic concepts, such as intuitive knowledge, creation, the virtual and the actual, the vital *élan*, the closed and the open society, are all instances of self-overcoming, and that the famous Bergsonian oppositions (quantity/quality, space/time, matter/memory, freedom/determinism, etc.) are not contradictory because they are analytic, objectified views on the indivisible dynamics governing the overstepping of limitations.³ In other words, my contention is that most of the criticisms addressed to the notion of duration originate from the difficulty in understanding time in terms other than chronology, despite Bergson's insistence that it is being in the making and, as such, one that equally excludes the no more and the not yet. To think in duration is to think being without holes and latencies, that is, without negativity. Being is means being is becoming, not in a passing time, but "in a present which is thick, and furthermore, elastic, which we can stretch indefinitely backward by pushing the screen which masks us from ourselves farther and farther away."⁴ If we can stretch it indefinitely, it is because it rolls up on itself so that it is made rather than being undone or filling gaps.

To have a good idea of the groundbreaking impact of Bergson's notion of duration, no better way exists than to show how the notion fuses crucial attributes of reality that philosophers often considered as incompatible. I have in mind the problem that philosophy faced since its inception, namely, the relation of being with movement and change.

Though the relation is undeniable, philosophers found it difficult to apprehend without transgressing the principle of non-contradiction. Indeed, the condition for that which is to cease to be and for that which is not to come into being is the granting of some kind of reality to non-being. But nothing is nothing or, as Parmenides puts it, “never shall it be proven that not-being is.”⁵ Accordingly, there is no possible transition from being to not being or from not being to being. Once the ontological impasse was admitted, two alternatives remained to avoid the extreme solution of the rejection of movement and change. The one alternative was to insert some emptiness or lack into being, thereby conceiving of change as realization, development, be it through the actualization of potentialities or the dialectical resolution of inner contradictions. The other possibility was to exchange content for form so that what is no more and what is not yet reveal how we represent being, not how being is in itself. Taken up by many modern schools of thought, including phenomenology, this last Kantian solution by way of subjectification had one major unintended impact. More than the proposed solution, its critical dimension convinced Bergson that the friction between being and time stems from the use of a representational notion of time. The no more, the not yet, and the ephemeral present characteristic of time as chronology are all negative notions denoting absence and evanescence. Hardly could there be a notion as antithetical to the concept of being as this passing time.

It springs to mind that the conception of time that is more in line with the idea of being is duration. In opposition to the idea of dissolving time, duration turns time into a continuity that builds up or creates. What else does enduring mean but creation because its moments, instead of juxtaposing in a successive line, prolong into one another, thereby forming a rolling process? Since this idea of time does not puncture being with holes and latencies, it expels nothingness. Moreover, the fusion of moments initiates a self-generating process that can take two forms: (1) extension when the prolongation of moments is relaxed to the point of displaying contents, without thereby reaching the point of separation; and (2) condensation when the moments of time are gathered, yielding an indivisible qualitative heterogeneity. Since the two directions are two sides of the same reality, the procedure realizes self-creation through the compressed gathering of what is obtained through relaxation. The obvious conclusion is that Bergson’s notion of creation is exactly a process of self-overcoming.

This book demonstrates the centrality of the concept of self-overcoming by using it as a lens not only to highlight the major Bergsonian theses but also to correct misinterpretations that are often responsible for most of the unfair criticisms. Thus, Chapter 2 elucidates Bergson's notion of intuitive knowledge, the reason for dealing with this issue first being that none of the Bergsonian concepts achieves clarity unless one keeps in mind the existence of two modes of knowledge. Notably, the Kantian idea of putting time and space at the same level as forms of representation requires, when it is correctly understood, the distinction between spatialized, representational time and generative or creative time. While representation and intelligence juxtapose things in space and moments in spatialized time for the good of practical and social life, in gathering the spatially distinct moments and things, intuitive knowledge thinks in duration and, in so doing, grasps them from inside. In other words, it enacts or performs instead of taking external views on things. The relationship between intelligence and intuition is thus not one of opposition but of complementarity, since the role of intuition is to reintegrate what the analytic ability of intelligence separates and externally connects. Clearly, this effort of reintegration of what is dissociated is how intuition incorporates and overcomes the work of intelligence.

Chapter 3 undertakes a thorough study of duration by contrasting the notion with representative conceptions of time. It shows that when philosophers admit the reality of time, they either reduce becoming to an appearance or to an unfolding of what is already given, as in the case of dialectics. Since time, so conceived, does or produces nothing, the need to provide a specific function favored the subjectification of time. While the reduction of time to representation conveniently agrees with the needs of practical life, it posits duration as what time must be to be real and hence productive. Time becomes generative if its moments, instead of dissociating and displaying, fuses into an indistinct and heterogeneous unity. For a unity to be both indistinct and multiple, it must be actualized as consciousness, that is, as a content existing in the mode of self-consciousness. In this way, going beyond phenomenology, Bergson accounts for both the intentionality of consciousness and its ontological dimension. In its practical function, consciousness is intentionality; as duration, it is being made. With this result, the chapter moves toward the idea of duration as substance: the prolongation of attributes and states into one another excludes the recourse to a fixed support, just as it overcomes dualism, since the distinction between

consciousness and matter moves from being substantial to a difference in intensity. Differentiations based on consideration of tension and relaxation associate the intensification of duration with the gestation of effort. With effort, we have what is needed to overcome the debate between the defenders of free will and determinists. Both positions are just different retrospective reconstructions based on the belief that the action in question is already given. For the proponents of free will, freedom is about choosing between given alternative courses; for determinists, the choice is illusory because the die is already cast. In thus refusing to pay attention to the fact that decision takes time, both theories decline the path leading to a solution, namely, the effort of concentration yielding a creative outcome, as opposed to choosing between preexisting courses of action or unfolding a predetermined course.

Chapter 4 deepens the durational unity and distinction between consciousness and materiality, as encapsulated in the concept of “vital élan.” Since Bergson’s attempt is to go beyond dualism by conceiving consciousness, life, and materiality as different levels of durational tension, the prime condition for this stratifying approach is to provide an ontology that is free of negativity. In particular, the dualistic opposition between matter and consciousness must be set aside and replaced by a conception allowing the transition from the one to the other. The removal of opposition invalidates the reductionism on which monistic schools of idealism and materialism are based. To this effect, the chapter reviews Bergson’s arguments against nothingness and his restriction of negative concepts to practical significance, thereby laying the ground for an integrative ontology. This is where the question of Bergson’s consistency is raised. As many critics noted, his understanding of matter as a movement inverse of life introduces negativity into the center of his ontology. While admitting that Bergson describes the connection between matter and life in terms of opposition, I argue that one must differentiate the level of analysis from the intuitive grasp whose defining feature is precisely the overcoming of oppositions. In fusing life and matter, intuition obtains the vision of an élan, of an inversion recuperating as a striving to surpass itself, to obtain more from itself than its original endowment. Living beings are various outcomes of this striving, otherwise called evolution, which then is essentially creative because the necessity of materiality can be circumvented only through invention. In addition to dismissing both finalism and mechanism, the creative conception of evolution clearly demarcates Bergsonism from dialectical thinking.

On the one hand, the striving nature of life means that the *élan* is finite, trapped as it is in its own inversion as necessity; on the other hand, as a self-overcoming phenomenon, it has no terminus.

Since the immanence of life to matter no longer allows the recourse to a dualism of substance, it raises the question of knowing the process by which conscious life comes to face an external world. Chapter 5 addresses the question with the view of understanding the genesis of the subject through the display of a world reflecting its possible actions. It begins by exposing the source of the contradictions of classical theories, namely, the conception of perception as a projection of the mental duplicates formed from the reactions of the brain to the influences of external objects. To this assumption shared by realists and materialists, idealism responds that the reference to an externally existing world has no foundation given that the perceiver has access only to what is in the mind. The only way to break the deadlock is to advance the bold thesis that things are perceived neither in the brain nor in the mind; instead, they are perceived where they are because they are made perceivable. Since the necessity of matter is the reason for the non-perceivability of things, a mechanism able to select what is of interest to the living body while also retarding the actions and reactions connecting the perceiver with the selected portion would make them perceivable. In other words, the brain is not an organ of representation, but a delaying and selecting mechanism that inserts indetermination into the material environment and, in so doing, converts necessity into possible actions. To say that things are perceived where they are is to imply that they are perceived as they are. However, we do not perceive them as they are, that is, as fleeting and numberless vibrations, as science describes them. Hence Bergson's distinction between pure perception and concrete perception: through the condensing act of memory, the fleeting vision of pure perception is changed into the concrete perception of stable and colorful objects. The affirmation that things are perceived where they are seems to suggest a convergence between phenomenology and Bergsonism. In assessing the convergence, the chapter highlights their crucial difference. Though both reject the theory of perception as a projection of mental states, with phenomenology, consciousness reveals things thanks to its intentionality, while to Bergson, things themselves are revealed to the subject, precisely by appearing as images. Pure perception is the lowest or impersonal level of consciousness; concrete perception is the level of the subject born out of the durational continuity of memory. In this way,

the fleeting present of the living body is overcome by the being-made or the self.

To fully account for the transition from pure to concrete perception, Chapter 6 first develops memory's role in practical life and then tackles the issue of the union of mind and body. Unlike the appearing and disappearing present of materiality, the present of consciousness has some thickness because memory prolongs the past into the present. This integration of moments generates a perpetual tension actualizing consciousness, as opposed to the non-consciousness of materiality caused by its evanescent present. The prolongation is also how action benefits from past experience instead of being an automatic response to external influences. Experience becomes useful if the relevant information is selected from the past: hence the positive role of forgetting. The latter operates like a blockage keeping unconscious the irrelevant part, thereby focusing consciousness on practical life. To speak of what is no more in terms of non-consciousness is to reject the theory of memory as a weak perception in favor of theory advocating the active creation of memory-images. The rejection entails the distinction between pure memory and memory-images, with the consequence that pure memory is not a storage, but an indivisible and indistinct continuity, in short, the thinking and concrete self. To develop this point further, the chapter confronts Deleuze's interpretation of Bergson's view in the direction of "world-memory" and shows that confining consciousness to the psychological level, in distinction to the ontological status of memory, does not agree with the Bergsonian identification of consciousness with memory. This identification is also used to contest interpretations proposing a rapprochement between Bergson and phenomenology. Though some similarities are undeniable, the huge difference is that the Bergsonian retention is just not intentionality in that it is also an ontological act, the continuity of the being-made. Given that memory is an imageless continuity, the question of its actualization as memory-images ushers in the study of the sensorimotor function of the living body. Memory uses the sensations associated with the nascent actions of motor memory to assume the appearance of images and inserts them into the present of the living body. This image appearance effects the union of mind and body, which is, therefore, nothing more than synchronization. In proposing an alternative to parallelism as well as to the assumption of a causal relation, as envisaged by dualism or materialism, Bergsonism reduces the issue of mind-body relation to the process by which the mind limits itself so as to be

attentive to the life of the body. Nothing could illustrate better the concept of self-overcoming than the mind overflowing the body and limiting itself to upgrade practical life.

The last chapter extends the concept of self-overcoming to moral and social issues and to the question of social progress, as examined in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The book places the theme of self-overcoming at the center of moral and social issues by conceiving social life as a stoppage carrying the injunction to overcome it so as to continue the unfinished creative work of life. In this case, overcoming means the effort to unbind the restrictions and the hierarchical organization that form the basis of the closed society. As a continuation of the biological work, the closed society is natural to human beings and is the source of obligations in a setting structured around the distinction between command and obedience. In addition, the sense of belonging is strengthened by a natural hostility to other groups and the fear of supernatural powers protective of the social order. This conception of social order as a stoppage posits another source of morality and religion calling for the continuation of the movement in the direction of human fraternity and spearheaded by the mystic love of humanity. Because the one source wants to open what the other source has closed, the temptation is great for a dialectical reading of this duality of source. However, a crucial factor is missing owing to Bergson's rejection of a goal-driven historical process: unlike the notion of stage, stoppage requires a creative deviation, not a linear process. Consequently, the relationship between the two sources does not translate into the closed progressively realizing the ideal or mixing with it. Rather, the mystical, while remaining distinct, inspires the creative effort to translate love, which by nature is limitless and hence beyond legality and obligation, in terms of rights and duties. The inspirational relation between the ideal and the real, as opposed to the real progressively realizing the ideal, is due to the fact that the closed society is a natural structure that cannot be removed. This fact advises a cautious usage of the term "progress." Not only do the realized advancements remain fragile, but also disharmony conditions progress because the tendencies of social life cannot develop at the same time. The need for a successive development of the tendencies explains social conflicts and imbalances, in particular those affecting modernity. Without rejecting the effort to correct the problems by reforms, Bergson argues that the reliable solution to counter the excesses of modern life, notably the frenzied pursuit of material wealth, comfort, and pleasure, is the

commitment to simple life subsequent to a spiritual renovation inspired by the mystic love of God and humanity. This radical solution is none other than a call for the overcoming of the human, a call that is all the more pressing as our natural characteristics are ill-equipped to handle the destructive powers that science and technology have put at our disposal.

NOTES

1. Michael R. Kelly, "Introduction: Bergson's Phenomenological Reception: The Spirit of a Dialogue of Self-Resistance," in *Bergson and Phenomenology*, ed. Michael R. Kelly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.
2. John Mullarkey, "*La Philosophie nouvelle*, or Change in Philosophy," in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 1.
3. In agreement with Hugh Tomlison and Barbara Habberjam, who translated Deleuze's book, *Bergsonism*, I retain the French word *élan* throughout this study. The English word, "impetus," often used to translate "*élan*" does not render the range of the French meaning "from 'momentum,' through 'surge' to 'vigor'." See *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 9.
4. Henri Bergson, "Philosophical Intuition," in *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Dover Publications), 106.
5. Parmenides, "The Eleatic School," in *The Presocratics*, ed. Philip Wheelwright (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1966).



CHAPTER 2

Intuitive Knowledge via the Inversion of Intelligence

Gilles Deleuze's condensed but highly insightful book, *Bergsonism*, begins with the study of intuition as a philosophical method. This beginning poses a problem since in a letter to one of his critics, Harald Hoffding, Bergson says, "the theory of intuition, to which you give much greater weight than that of duration, only emerged for me quite a long time after the latter: it is derived from it and can only be understood through it."¹ So categorical a confirmation of the precedence of the doctrine over the method questions the wisdom of clarifying the method without first elucidating the notion of duration. Yet one thing is also undeniable: even Bergson's first book, *Time and Free Will*, is not absolutely intelligible unless one entertains, albeit it vaguely, the possibility of a form of knowledge different from the rational approach. Indeed, what else does the opposition between space and duration establish but the need to set aside our usual spatial approach to things, notably to our inner life, to access duration?

Though the order of discovery goes from duration to intuition and that the latter is not intelligible without the former, I agree with Deleuze that the order of presentation and explanation of the philosophical system should begin with the elucidation of the intuitive method. My argument is that Bergson, though he did not have yet a clear idea of his method of thinking, was nevertheless quite aware that duration was not fully transparent to an exclusively rational type of thinking. I subscribe all the more to the idea of first defining the intuitive method

because I am convinced that many of the controversies and misconceptions about Bergsonism stem from the fact that those who raise them do not always keep in mind Bergson's use of two different methods of knowledge. In particular, they do not acknowledge his constant movement from the one to the other, and so are prone to denounce contradictions, not to mention an illogical form of thinking. A case in point is the criticisms of the notion of duration because the conception seems to conflate the distinction between the three dimensions of time even as Bergson's entire purpose is to show that such a distinction presupposes the spatialization of time. Therefore, even if the comprehension of the intuitive method presupposes that of duration, it is equally true that insight into the latter begins when we concede that logic and rationality are not the only yardsticks to determine the legitimacy of a conception. Granted that the presentation of the method necessarily anticipates what the coming chapters will develop, this inaugural study will at least serve as a propaedeutic, in particular by telling us what to avoid to access the notion of duration.

ACTION AND INTUITION

Besides confirming the gradual derivation of the method of intuition from duration, Bergson admits that the usage of the term "intuition" caused him "some degree of hesitation."² Understandably, intuition is a term loaded with possible misunderstandings, notably because it is often associated with immediate knowledge that appeals more to feeling or to a special, even mysterious gift or inspiration, than to the known rational methods of analysis, critical examination, and verification. The question is to know why Bergson decides to retain the word while being quite aware of the high risks of misunderstanding, specifically the risk of being charged of irrationalism. I see no better way to answer the question than to refer to Immanuel Kant's own move. Having admitted that the categories of the mind shape and, for that matter, hide the true nature of things, Kant could not avoid the conclusion that access to what is beyond the constructed world would require a different, an intuitive type of knowledge. However, though he admits the necessity of an intuitive metaphysis, he also maintains that humans lack this kind of intuition. In his own words, to resolve metaphysical disputes, humans would require "a special mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual, which is not that which we possess."³

Why did Kant conclude that intuitive knowledge is impossible after acknowledging that it is needed to overcome a predicament? Bergson has one answer: Kant did not realize that “in order to reach intuition it is not necessary to transport ourselves outside the domain of the senses and of consciousness.”⁴ Kant’s conclusion was logical once he had accepted the traditional meaning of metaphysics as the study of what is beyond experience. He rightly saw that such an attempt can only lead to antinomies that are not susceptible of any resolution for the reason that what is beyond experience is not capable of verification. For him, human intuition being exclusively sensible cannot be used to settle disputes transcending the world of experience.

Such a conclusion would be unwarranted if the representation of things shaped by the categories of the mind is not so much concealing their objective nature as framing them for our practical needs and possibilities. In this case, the distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us changes from metaphysical to a difference between the whole and the part, whose consequence is that the part is of the same nature as the whole. If what is given as experience is just a limitation of the whole and not a veil concealing a “back-world,” to use Frederic Nietzsche’s expression, then it will be established that “in the absolute we live and move and have our being.”⁵ When metaphysics ceases to be the study of what is beyond experience, the kind of intuition that according to Kant humans do not possess is no longer a requirement, since metaphysical knowledge becomes a work of integration of a fractured experience rather than a venture into a noumenal world.

The belief that the phenomenal is not of a different order from the noumenal draws the line of demarcation between Kant and Bergson. Although both agree that the emergence of the phenomenal involves the activity of a subject, the activity is not one of subjectivization for Bergson. Instead, it is an act of selection from a given whole for the good of practical life so that the categories of the mind conveniently frame elements taken from the real, be it from the reality of our inner life or the external world. If we set aside the subjectivizing elements that the thinking mind provides, such as spatial representation and the condensing and interpretative input of memory, there remains the pure contact with the real, which is none other than what intuition supplies prior to any construction. As Bergson puts it, separate perception from recollection, and “the reality of things is no more constructed or reconstructed, but touched, penetrated, lived.”⁶ Evidently, the intuitive contact is even

more direct when we deal with our own inner life. For Kant, perception is how we know things and we know things by subjectivizing them, that is, through representation; for Bergson, perception is how we act on things and we act on things by detecting our possible actions on them where they are (see Chapter 4). As a result, after reducing perception to knowledge, to a subjectivization of the world, Kant has no means to go out of his subjectivity. Not so for Bergson: action limits the world but does not subjectivize it so that no attempt is made to come out of subjectivity in which we were never locked in the first place. Even if the transition from perception to knowledge involves subjectivization, the latter retains the intuitive basis of perception, and the progress of knowledge is none other than the endeavor to expand it. Clearly, the need for action to bite on something real prevents Bergson from following the Kantian path to relativism. As Bergson states,

action cannot move in the unreal. A mind born to speculate or to dream, I admit, might remain outside reality, might deform or transform the real.... But an intellect bent upon the act to be performed and the reaction to follow, feeling its object so as to get its mobile impression at every instant, is an intellect that touches something of the absolute.⁷

It is one thing to ascertain the intuitive basis of our contact with our inner life and the external world, but quite another to raise it to the level of knowledge. A transformation of this nature cannot happen without the involvement of intelligence, by which alone intuition becomes capable of reflecting on its content. Furthermore, intuition will provide a different knowledge if it integrates and transcends intelligence, and this means the study of intuition requires that we first unravel the method of intelligence. In this regard, Bergson is quite straightforward: the requirements of action deliver how intelligence operates. This explains why Bergson prefers the term “intelligence” to that of “reason.” The latter conveys the idea of an instrument of speculation, while for Bergson the “reason” of philosophers is in reality an instrument of action. It is more appropriately called intelligence to underline its practical orientation and problem-solving skills. Still, to avoid any misunderstanding, we always must keep in mind that, though in serving action intelligence produces a representation of the world that has no parity with its inner nature, nevertheless, it does not give a false or a relative interpretation. Stated otherwise, one must understand representation as a mere frame

to enable action, and not as an ontological barrier concealing reality. The frame fractures the unity and continuity of the given, but does not cover the given objective reality with a subjective mantle. The role of scientific knowledge is to progressively expand the limitation by connecting the fractured elements to broader portions according to the laws of matter.

To say that the need to serve action determines the method of intelligence is to admit that theory of life and theory of knowledge are inseparable. For Bergson, a purely speculative knowledge of reality would not be of much help for life: to act, life must be able to arrange reality from the perspective of its needs and practical possibilities. To connect life and knowledge is above all to reduce the range of knowledge to what is practically possible for the living being. The connection excludes the knowledge of the whole in favor of bits of reality so arranged as to allow action. The universal form of obtaining such an arrangement is first through the representation of space. The homogeneity and ideality of space constitute a perfect antidote to the fundamental heterogeneity and indistinctiveness of reality. Indeed, not only does the projection of a spatial vision compartmentalize reality according to the order of magnitude resulting in the smaller being contained in the bigger, but it also unties reality in such a way that it appears composed of distinct and juxtaposed things. For instance, viewed through space, the continuity of movement is given as the movement of objects, which is further decomposed into a series of juxtaposed and immobile points portraying not so much mobility as possible stoppages. The vision of a mobile object going from one point to the next point translates the qualitative and continuous nature of movement into distinct positions in space that serve as references for practical responses. A related instrument to reduce the heterogeneity and qualitative mobility of reality is the use of words to signify generalities or resemblances on the basis of similar attitudes to things. To detect similarities in a moving and heterogeneous reality is to introduce the stability that makes action possible. Space and language thus collaborate to overhang the heterogeneity and indivisible mobility of the real with “a network of stable and useful concepts.”⁸ The ability to fix, separate, and generalize is how intelligence frames a predictable world by isolating and connecting occurrences as causes and effects to the great benefit of action. What is said here also applies to our inner life. Take the case of associationist psychology: after dividing the underlying continuity of our mental life into distinct and stable states, it connects them causally in the hope of making human behaviors predictable. While spatial

representation decomposes our inner life, the use of words generalizes by ignoring what is unique in favor of resemblances and repetitions, the outcome of which is that a social ego is superposed on the natural individual.

To spell out the underlying premise of this analysis, let us say that nothing stands out in reality if we remove the living subject. If the constant flow of reality is heterogeneous and indivisible (which, by the way, are the very characteristics of duration, as will be shown in the next chapter), then there is nothing that is distinct, fixed, and separate by itself. It is action that requires dissociation, stoppage, and separation. Since life cannot dismantle reality directly or materially, it would obtain the same result if it could isolate and select what it needs in an ideal way. The representation and the projection on reality of a homogeneous and void frame can precisely effect symbolic divisions and separations. The result is that some aspects of reality protrude while others are left out. Space is this nothingness that intelligence inserts into reality to separate and juxtapose as distinct objects some of its traits while removing others by omitting them. This role of nothingness is in perfect agreement with Bergson's rejection of the idea of nothing and negative judgments. As will be argued in the coming chapters, Bergson denies the ontological use of nothingness essentially because it generates false problems. By contrast, he is eager to note its practical significance, since it is by using the negational power of the representation of void that intelligence fragments the compact and moving reality into distinct manipulable pieces.

It is plain that this treatment of reality sets the task of intuitive knowledge. It is to restore the fullness and continuity of being by transcending its fragmentations; it is to undo what nothingness has done. With intuition, says Arnaud Bouaniche, "Bergson discovers a purely internal vision, able to grasp its object without dividing it, without cutting into multiple aspects, that is, without letting it fall into space."⁹ Since things in space are conveniently arranged for the goal of action, it is necessary to affirm that the manner we know things is not how they come into being. We conflate the two each time we think that the combination of the parts into which an object is divided gives us the genesis of that object. To speak of an object is already to isolate and fix, and only an isolated and fixed object can be divided into parts. The operation amounts to a mechanical reconstruction, which precisely thinks the object as already done, and not as being done. However, if instead of isolating the object, we replace it into the whole to which it belongs, we have movement, becoming of the whole, not a thing. In this moving whole, nothing is

particularly cause or particularly effect; instead, there is a total change that is best described as a ripening process.

To think the integral and moving whole, we have to go beyond representational knowledge. Action requires representation, that is, the distinction between subject and object as a result of which the world is given as an external scene with distinct objects that can be diversely connected depending on our needs. These external, mechanical connections do not reveal how real change occurs, but what we must do in the part of reality that interests us to detect and obtain desired effects. Where the future repeats the past, as in the case of material processes, the established connections are successful in predicting the expected outcomes, even though the occurrence of the outcomes is not mechanically induced. The situation is different with our inner life. Although we distinguish fixed states, the process is not always the same owing to the eruption of novelty, of an outcome that is not reducible to antecedents. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same in both cases: how we know, or (which is the same thing) how we arrange things does not duplicate how changes occur in reality. Despite this difference, there is no ontological mismatch between the order of genesis and the order of representative knowledge because everything happens as though antecedent facts determine the present state of things, somewhat like a film viewed in a fast-moving mode conserves the same content and sequence as the same film viewed in a slow-moving mode. In the first case, images appear as flickering movements; in the second, they are more detailed with defined contours that pass one after the other. Instead of a fast-moving indistinct flux, the slow-moving mode unrolls distinct images that can be connected causally in such a way as to make up a story.

The downside of arranging the world for the benefit of action is that it impedes the thinking of creation and novelty. In decomposing movement and change into distinct and juxtaposed moments, the arrangement glosses over the essential fluidity from which distinct figures are formed. In place of an ever-changing and indistinct flux, representation substitutes an order of determinism where what follows appears as an effect of an antecedent cause. The implication of this order is that the effect is prefigured in the cause and this entails that movement is simply unfolding what is already given. Here we recognize Bergson's famous critique of the idea of the possible based on the argument that the belief that things were possible before being real is just another arsenal to deny the reality of novelty, the thinking of reality as creation. In showing

that the possible is just a retrospective view “throwing present realities, reduced to possibilities or virtualities, back into the past, so that what is compounded now must, in its eyes, always have been so,” Bergson ascertains at one and the same time both the practical significance of the idea of the possible and its improper speculative use.¹⁰ Actually, the insensibility to novelty is little surprising for an acting being: unlike the repetitive, the new is not actionable. Retrospection is how we anticipate by establishing repeatable connections between things. Clearly, to firmly believe that the conditions of today will repeat tomorrow, I must assume that the future is potentially present in the past. Without this belief, the future would be completely uncertain and its consequence would be the paralysis of action. As crucial as this belief is for action, the fact remains that it speculatively blinds us to what is new, since we have eyes only for what is predictable to the detriment of “the continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty which seems to be going on in the universe.”¹¹

In unraveling the practical objective of the methods of intelligence and what the methods overlook to achieve its goal, we set the stage for determining the target and method of intuitive knowledge. Since intelligence misses the creative side of reality, the proper object of intuition is the thinking of creation and novelty. It springs to mind that the thinking of creation posits a reality that is neither finished nor merely unfolding but is, on the contrary, in gestation, a reality that is in real time, with its becoming undetermined. We saw that the opposite is true for intelligence: division, juxtaposition, and fixation operate by substituting space for real time. Bergson calls this real time duration, in distinction to representational time with its distinct divisions of past, present, and future. So that, “to think intuitively is to think in duration, to grasp duration in all things, to pay attention to what is being done rather than to what is already done, to progresses rather than to things.”¹² But before focusing on the study of the intuitive method per se, it is prudent to strengthen our argument by comparing Bergson’s epistemological principles with those of the major theories of knowledge.

BERGSONISM AND THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

The first factor that arises when the topic of theory of knowledge is raised is Bergson’s predilection for the empirical approach. To him, reliance on experience, as argued by empiricism, is the only way to establish the truth of a judgement, especially where there are competing

assertions. At best, reasoning can establish what is possible, but in so doing, it shows that another interpretation is possible, thereby proving that only experience can settle the dispute of interpretation. It is equally true, on the other hand, that Bergson is quite reluctant to follow empiricism because of his conviction that the experience to which empiricist thinkers refer is not a true experience in that it is already a construct. By naively taking what appears as experience, empiricism never engages in the work of finding true or pure experience by carefully separating what is really given from what our mind is adding. Accordingly, we give a clear idea of the line of demarcation between Bergsonism and empiricism if we say that “it is only experience that can give us certitude, but we must appeal to a broader and purer experience, an experience liberated from the molds our intellect has formed for its action upon matter.”¹³

This means that the experience of fixed and colorful objects with definite contours is not pure experience, any more than is pure experience the perception of our inner life as composed of distinct and fixed states. What is more, pure experience cannot be given through an act of perception for the reason that the latter implies the distinction between subject and object. Distancing is precisely the act of framing experience in accordance with the necessities of action. In other words, pure experience is attainable only through coincidence, through an apprehension from within rather than without. A form of knowledge that knows from inside instead of objectifying is one of direct vision. As such, it retains the empiricist requirement that whatever is true must be an object of experience and not something that is merely deduced from reasoning. The difference with empiricism is that the Bergsonian experience is purified: as experience through coincidence, it does not incorporate the experience of object by a distinct subject. Intuition is therefore an attempt to inverse what normally is the experience of a subject into an experience dissolving thingness into movement by precisely overcoming distancing.

This need to purify experience has led some critics to note some similarity between Bergson and phenomenology. Thus, according to Hanne Jacobs and Trevor Perri, “there is a resemblance between Bergsonian intuition and the purified phenomenological intuiting carried out in the phenomenological reduction.”¹⁴ In both cases, the condition of intuitive knowledge is the setting aside of philosophical beliefs, common prejudices, and useful assumptions about the world and the nature of things. A case in point is Bergson’s description of the world in *Matter and Memory* as an ensemble of images, which, he says, is what we obtain

when we put in parentheses the philosophical assumptions of realism, idealism, and materialism. The resolution to return to things by putting theories and habits of thinking aside in order to describe them as they genuinely appear attests that the affinity between phenomenology and Bergsonism transpires in their method as well as in their objective.

No sooner does one speak of affinity than the huge gap separating the two systems of thought jumps out. Whereas for phenomenology the purpose of reduction “is to bring into view this world as it is given to and disclosed by subjectivity,” in the case of Bergson, the goal is to reveal the absolute by going beyond subjectivity.¹⁵ The purpose of phenomenological reduction is not to inquire about the existence of the absolute and its intrinsic nature; rather, it is to disclose the phenomenal nature of the real through the intentionality of consciousness. That is why distance, which is “opening” for phenomenology, is for Bergson “separation,” as Renaud Barbaras puts it.¹⁶ For the former, distance is how the object appears to consciousness, while for Bergson, it is how the object is singled out to become the target of action. Bergson thinks that there is a passage from the selected to the absolute because what appears is just a fraction of the absolute reality. He accordingly sanctions the pursuit of metaphysical knowledge even if, unlike the traditional approach, the object of metaphysics is not what is beyond experience. By contrast, phenomenology defends the phenomenality of being, that is, its relative nature to consciousness and the metaphysical question of the existence and the nature of the real independent of subjectivity is dropped, not because what is beyond is unknowable while being given, but simply because the given is what appears to consciousness. To speak of a given that is not given to consciousness is to regress into the prejudices of traditional metaphysics.

To bring out the deep divergence of the two systems of thought by displaying the superficiality of their affinity is legitimate, provided one also shows that Bergson is consistent when he maintains that the absolute is the object of an intuitive experience. His demarche is to make metaphysical knowledge possible by countering the traditional tendency of placing the absolute outside experience. It is the very understanding of experience as a cut within the absolute that enables Bergson to assert that what appears is a just a portion, a limitation of the absolute. True, the portion is attributed to the inputs of subjectivity, but it is not reducible to a merely subjective reality insofar as it is a selection from a given. Phenomenology does not share this understanding of experience: what appears is not a cut, but a relation binding what appears to a subject

so that there is no “identity between being and being perceived.”¹⁷ What appears is not the appearance of the given, but an appearance to a subject, which appearance does not refer to an alleged given. For Bergson, however, as is the case with George Berkeley, there is identity between being and what is perceived, but with the major difference that, unlike Berkeley’s view, the perceived is not an idea in the mind. Instead, it is a portion obtained by a cut from a much larger and ontologically similar whole. Conceived as a difference between the part and the whole, what appears naturally calls for its integration into the totality so that metaphysics is just an extension of the perceived. No such extension is possible for phenomenology, since what appears has no prolongation outside the circuit of subject-object relation. In the end, it turns out to be that the philosopher who advocates opening is Bergson inasmuch as he shows that the perceived is just a sample that we can expand to have access to the whole, and not an appearing that locks us in our subjectivity. Phenomenology has no path beyond the human, whereas for Bergson the non-human is reachable through the expansion of the human.

This conclusion brings us back to the point where Bergson departs from empiricism by requiring the purification of experience. Only when experience is stripped of the form necessitated by action that it delivers the residue of the absolute that it contains. Empiricism could not undertake this purification owing to its neglect of the practical nature of experience. This same disregard for the practical function of intelligence explains the theoretical difficulties of rationalism. Its main problem is its inability to explain the reason why the categories and operations of the mind apply so successfully to nature. To counter the empiricist derivation of the categories of the mind from experience subsequent to the *tabula rasa* theory, rationalism proposes innatism without ever being able to explain satisfactorily how the content of experience and the laws of the mind happen to be in agreement. No matter how the mind acquires the categories and no matter whether the categories deliver direct knowledge of what is outside or are just forms organizing the contents of experience, as Kant wants, the truth remains that the correspondence between reason and sense-experience is nothing short of a mystery.

Take the case of Descartes: the conformity of reason and nature rests, according to him, on the absolute trust in God. Since God created both nature and the faculty of judgement and He is not a deceiver, Descartes confidently infers that “whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true.”¹⁸ Descartes’s recourse to God clearly shows

the seriousness of the problem faced by rationalism. Also, his far-fetched answer indicates that a mundane answer to the question of how the way our mind thinks agrees with the way nature works becomes plausible only through a theory tying intelligence to life and its needs. Indeed, is there a more plausible foundation for the correspondence between mind and nature than the generation of a form of thinking suited for action from the fundamental need of life to act on matter? If we assign to human intelligence a speculative goal, the answer to the question of how intelligence acquired categories that happen to apply to the material world offers two possible answers other than that of Descartes, all of which are far from being satisfactory. There is the empiricist position: it argues that the agreement does no more than confirm the derivation of mental categories from experience. However, Kant shows that experience cannot deliver what empiricism expects it to deliver unless it is already rationally ordered. As Kant puts it, experience “involves understanding” that “has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me.”¹⁹ The solution that Kant suggests is that reason imposes its laws, thereby “constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason’s own determining.”²⁰ For categories that have no empirical origin to successfully organize experience, the only explanation left is imposition. But such a solution, Bergson notes, comes at a “price,” which is that our knowledge is “relative to our faculty of knowing” and that metaphysical knowledge is impossible.²¹

The common source of the problem that the above theories face is the same misconception, namely, the attribution of a speculative goal to human intelligence. Once the speculative origin of intelligence is dropped, there remains the thesis that the agreement between the laws of intelligence and experience stems from the necessity of developing a form of thinking that supports action. And how could thinking acquire such a function unless it is modeled on the behavior of matter itself? The evolution of intelligence in the direction of materiality is inscribed in the recognition of intelligence as an instrument of action. Empiricism is right to maintain that the affinity between the order of intelligence and that of nature cannot happen unless the two are somehow in communication. Even so, the communication need not be in the form of a mechanical imprint of the one on the other. The necessity of action can impart the evolution of thought in the direction of matter, without involving any mechanical inscription. Similarly, the downside of the one imposing its laws on the other is avoided, obvious as it is that intelligence

and materiality are necessarily in correspondence if they owe their attributes to the same movement.

To say that intelligence developed its form by going in the direction of materiality is to recognize that *“it is the same inversion of the same movement which creates at once the intellectuality of mind and the materiality of things.”*²² Without going into the issue of the unity of life and matter, which will be discussed in the next chapter, we can already say that the conformity of intelligence with matter posits not only a common source, but also reveals the nature of the movement actualizing both of them. As attested by their common attribute of spatiality, they both derive from a movement of relaxation, of inversion of a previous tension. The fact that materiality fits into spatiality points to a movement of détente, to a prior tension undoing itself, which corroborates the methods of intelligence, to wit, the tendency to divide, dismantle, juxtapose, etc., the given. Intelligence is therefore a mental performance of détente, a form of thought that enacts the actual tendency of matter.

The understanding of intelligence as inversion has two important implications: (1) since the very concept of inversion posits a prior tension, the latter is a disposition that can be activated provided certain measures are taken; and (2) modeled on the movement of matter, intelligence is little equipped to understand what does not accord with the tendency of matter. Such is the case with the organizing work of life and the manifestations of spiritual life. In both cases, what is required is a form of thinking that restitutes tension by blending what intelligence separates and juxtaposes. To do so is none other than to actualize the intuitive grasp by immersing the discontinuity of spatialization into the continuity of duration. Unlike the method of science, which accentuates the tendency of materiality, philosophical intuition is thus an attempt to inverse intelligence in the direction of tension. In the words of Bergson, *“to philosophize means to reverse the normal direction of the workings of thought.”*²³

At this stage of our inquiry, we must face the question of where is the difference between Bergsonism and the school of pragmatism. Both emphasize the importance of action and subordinate knowledge to the promotion of practical life. Moreover, Bergson strongly defends William James’s theory of knowledge against what he calls “impoverished and falsified” interpretations.²⁴ In particular, he praises pragmatism for moving away from the idea of truth as conformity to a conception of truth as invention. This inventive nature of knowledge discloses a striking similarity not only between Bergson and James, but also, and

paradoxically, between them and Karl Marx. Asserting the creative function of knowledge, Marx writes:

mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve, since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.²⁵

A problem is not a true problem if it has no solution, and it has no solution if it is not posed in practical terms. In other words, the purpose of knowledge is not to reflect or copy reality; it is to present reality in such a way that we can insert our action, so that, as James puts it, “truth in our ideas means their power to ‘work’.”²⁶

Despite this wide range of agreement, Bergson admits that he has “certain reservations” against pragmatism.²⁷ The reservations are not hard to find and they revolve around two issues. The first one is that, though both agree on the practical rather than speculative dimension of intelligence and see truth as an invention to utilize reality, Bergson is not as disposed as James to abandon realism. As we saw, he believes that experience, provided it is purified, contains a residue of the objective reality that science can expand to obtain an increasingly adequate knowledge of materiality. Granted that concepts are inventions, they work because the truths that we invent “have their roots in ‘currents’ that are not created by us, in what Bergson elsewhere calls ‘articulations of the real’.”²⁸ We can conveniently enhance, select, arrange, anticipate, etc., insofar as the articulations lend themselves to such treatments. Invention does not mean that truth is pure construction or imposition; rather, it signifies actualization of an inherent aptitude or inclination. This is what a critic misses when, opposing Bergson to pragmatism, he writes that for the former “truth is a thing primary and ultimate, not a thing derivative and functional” whereas “for pragmatism, the instrument in its works does not conceal reality; it reveals reality.”²⁹ The problem is not the functionality of truth and its ability to reveal reality: Bergson fully endorses James’s position. It is simply that Bergson maintains that the success of truth and what it reveals result from an actualization of “currents” that “are part and parcel of reality.”³⁰ So conceived, truth is revelation of what is usable, with the understanding that the usable is an arrangement based on something real, that is, on a tendency.

The second issue drawing a distinction between Bergson and pragmatism is Bergson's refusal to restrict the human ability to know to utility. For him, there is another dormant faculty, namely intuition, which can be activated to procure a form of knowledge free of the imperative of utility. Because it is not serving action, intuitive knowledge can go beyond the limits prescribed by functionality and access the absolute. The existence of two kinds of knowledge, therefore, draws a line between Bergson and James. Whereas Bergson bases the distinction between science and philosophy on the duality of knowledge, pragmatism "does not aim to distinguish the method of philosophy from that of science, but to extend the method of science to philosophy."³¹ For Bergson, reality is one but not homogeneous, as it is made of two distinct movements, a descending movement represented by materiality and an ascending movement represented by life and spirit. Each movement requires a mode of knowledge that is distinct by its object as well as its method. Although expandable, the one mode is practical but limited; the other, albeit latent, is speculative and disinterested. The practical mode separates the knowing subject from the object, whereas the intuitive mode attempts to overcome the distinction. Moreover, the oneness of the two movements of reality establishes that the way to intuitive knowledge goes through the inversion of the practical mode. This inversion is none other than intelligence undoing its method by blending what it has divided and taking the upward path of tension, of integrative vision. What all this means is that Bergson separates truth from the intuitive knowledge of reality. Truth results from a form of knowledge detaching the subject from the object, whereas coincidence or the overcoming of subject-object distinction is the appropriate method of intuition. The latter knows reality in its totality, that is, as oneness of ascent and descent or, as Bergson phrases it, as "an action which is making itself across an action of the same kind which is unmaking itself."³²

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE

That two kinds of knowledge exist is undoubtedly a controversial proposition, but it is also a necessary precondition for the understanding of Bergsonism. As stated earlier, it is difficult to make sense of Bergsonian duration if one does not keep in mind that the notion stems from a form of thinking defying accepted cognitive norms. A proof of this is Bertrand Russell's position: unable to come to grips with the method of thought,

he characterizes Bergsonism as irrationalism, one of his arguments being the “confusion between the act of knowing and the object known.”³³ Yet, if one must pinpoint confusion, it is in the prevailing belief that reality, though diversified as testified by experience, does not require different modes of knowledge. Take the case of rationalism. While it generally supports the dualist proposal on the existence of two different substances, it claims that they can be known by the same method and form of thinking. How can two realities described as opposites be known by the same turn of mind? This does not mean that Bergson upholds dualism. He speaks of inversion precisely to emphasize difference within the unity of a monistic conception. The two movements composing reality do not operate the same way while being substantially one. Hence the distinction between intelligence and intuition: the one is *détente* and involves subject-object distinction, the other is condensation, effort and performs by coincidence.

Admittedly, the definition of intuition as knowledge by coincidence seems to cancel the very possibility of knowledge. Clearly, the primary condition of knowing is that the knower is distinct from what is known. Without distancing, whatever knowledge one expects to acquire is by definition blind and mute? The remark seems pertinent but it forgets that the relativity of knowledge is the inevitable consequence of basing all knowledge on the distinction between subject and object. Indeed, the distinction of the knower from the known can only signify that whatever is said about the object is a viewpoint: it is how the object is apprehended, and not how the object is in itself, to paraphrase Kant. Unless we abandon realism—the price of which is our impassable confinement into our own subjectivity—there is no other alternative than to admit that the only path to a form of knowledge that would be objective is the possibility of knowledge by coincidence. Let us assume for the moment that such a possibility exists and see how it would operate.

The good thing is that Bergson provides many examples illustrating the existence of two kinds of knowledge. The most familiar example is the lifting of the arm. Inwardly, the movement is felt as a simple and indivisible act, whereas viewed from outside, it becomes a movement in space that can be decomposed into indefinite points. The difference between the two is that, in the first case, I coincide with the movement and grasp it from inside, while in the second case I detach myself and view it as a spatial occurrence determined by the points it is crossing. The second type of knowledge defines the movement in terms of relation

between points: it is more interested in its various positions in space than in the actual movement. By contrast, the first kind is a sensation that captures a qualitative state rather than positions in space. The one grasps something that is absolute, that is, an act in the making; the other establishes relations, and in so doing leaves out the act in favor of relations.

The example of the arm, one may retort, raises more question than it solves. First of all, because I am able to feel myself, I can have an outward and inward view of the movement of my own body. Since such is not the case with objects external to my body, the only mode of knowledge that I have to know the external world is the outward mode. More importantly, the fact that I feel my body from inside does not constitute knowledge: feeling is just a sensation that neither analyzes nor explains. These objections look serious, but let us make sure we really understand what Bergson means by knowledge from inside before countering them. When the movement of an external object is reduced to a series of positions in space, it is because we have decided not to focus on the mobility itself, obvious as it is that a position in space is a possible stoppage, not a movement. The only way to think mobility *per se* is to think of it as a development or change of state. In the case of my body, I feel the qualitative change, but it does not mean that the moving external object is not going through a similar process even if I do not feel it from inside. Once I admit the continuity of the movement instead of counting points in space, I recognize that the distinct positions in space indicate where the object is at a given moment, not how it moves. When the focus is on continuity rather than points in space, the movement of the object becomes indivisible and, as such, is thought as change of state, and not as a series of positions in space.

Another example illustrating the idea of inward knowledge is the case of the novelist. The one possibility is that the novelist can describe a given character by means of a story relating a series of situations and adventures. In so doing, he/she uses words that convey things and situations that we already know, thereby providing a relative knowledge of the character, since the reference to our experience provides a view that is external to the character. By contrast, the novelist would give us an absolute insight if, instead of using external references, he/she takes us inside the character. Viewed from inside, rather than forming a series of fragmented pieces that simply add up, "the actions, gestures and words would then appear to flow naturally, as though from their source."³⁴

The view from inside thus gives an integral, living, and dynamic portrait, as opposed to the artificial collection of parts characteristic of an external view.

The above examples show that the dynamic vision denotes a change from spatial to temporal references. To apprehend a change of state instead of a series of distinct bits of change, one must link the changes by an inner continuity so as to feel a flow, a development where intelligence perceives distinct and juxtaposed moments. "Analysis," says Bergson, "operates on immobility, while intuition is located in mobility or, what amounts to the same thing, in duration."³⁵ To say that intuition is not analysis is to admit that the knowledge it provides is not the explanatory type operating with the usual methods of deduction and inference. The nature of such knowledge is best described as vision: rather than connecting and explaining, intuition shows, brings to light.

That intuitive knowledge provides vision is confirmed by Bergson's repeated insistence that the outcome of intuition is simple, unlike the complication of analysis. For example, the success of the novelist is not measured by the amount of provided views, but by "the simple and indivisible feeling I should experience if I were to coincide for a single moment with the personage himself."³⁶ Knowledge that is external multiplies viewpoints in the vain hope of exhausting the object. Since it possesses only fractions of the object, it uses signs and symbols that it variously combines to compose a replica in default of being able to coalesce with the original. Accordingly, reconstructing the object by description and analysis based on fragmented views produces anything but a simple notion of the object. By contrast, because intuitive knowledge is inside the object, it does not take viewpoints with which it attempts to reconstitute the object. The purpose is not to reconstitute the object from fractured and disjointed notions; it is to have its vision by lending, so to speak, to the object my own ability to sense. In external knowledge, the object is represented by my consciousness whereas in the act of intuition it is revealed, brightened from inside. Precisely, because it is not a reconstitution by assemblage but an illumination, the intuitive act is simple. The act that coincides sees no parts, as it embraces the object in its totality.

The point here is to understand that intuition delivers a simple view because it is the inversion of intelligence. Inversion of what is multiple and distinct results in merger, which merger is true unity or totality only to the extent it achieves simplicity. We see here the organic

and cooperative tandem between intuition and intelligence. In dividing reality and multiplying viewpoints, intelligence does no more than sow problems related to unity, continuity, genesis, etc., in short, those problems commonly termed “metaphysical.” Take the example of the self. Its division into distinct and separate states, which is necessary to an intellectual understanding, poses the problem of knowing whether the unity of the self is just a mere collection of disparate states or a transcendental notion. Since each answer seems equally valid, the issue turns into a conflict that has no solution. The example of the self shows that metaphysical problems are not only the very ones that intelligence raises, but also they are those that intelligence cannot solve by itself because it lacks the kind of experience needed to settle conflicting interpretations. Intelligence cannot provide the necessary vision insofar as it requires an inversion of its analytic tendency, an overturning of its dividing and juxtaposing method toward merger and tension.

The provision of the needed experience raises intuition to the level of knowledge. Granted that intuition involves feeling or sensation, the feeling is not a mere occurrence in that it is the result of a prior and intense intellectual work. Intuition is not a sudden or a mysterious inspiration; it is an answer to a question, the resolution of a problem, a test in the scientific usage of the term, with the specification that the provided proof goes beyond the constructed experiment of the scientist. Everything happens as though the failure of intelligence to settle the conflicts of interpretation sets the context of the experience liable to resolve them. In providing the vision that settles a dispute, intuition acts vis-à-vis intelligence like the Greek oracle. Accordingly, intuition is not simply what is sensed, it is also what is worked for and recognized as an answer. In short, “intuition has a lot to do with feeling, but with a specific sort of feeling” in that it is permeated with prior and far-reaching intellectual works.³⁷

The existence of an aesthetic faculty upholds the plea for a diversified approach to knowledge. What aesthetic creation and appreciation and intuitive knowledge have in common is that both require the inversion of the natural tendency to see things through the norms of utility. The ascription of a speculative virtue to intuition stems from its ability to grasp the real as it is in itself because it transcends utility, precisely by reversing, as we saw, the natural direction of intelligence. On the other hand, a large consensus exists connecting the creation and appreciation of beauty to a disinterested attitude. For one thing, the existence of an

aesthetic faculty attests that humans are not totally confined to utility and this lends support to the idea of intuitive knowledge. For another, there is a close affinity between aesthetic perception and the intuitive method of metaphysics. Indeed, doesn't art unveil qualities and nuances in things that we normally do not perceive? Moreover, while our ordinary perception focuses on the resemblance between things and their functions, thereby overlooking differences, art de-generalizes by revealing what is individual and unique in things. Since the ability of art to reveal what our ordinary perception overlooks or fails to see is due to its emancipation from the categories of utility, it provides the proof that "an extension of the faculties of perceiving is possible."³⁸

To be specific, what exactly is a vision not impacted by the norms of utility? To say that art is disinterested is not to say that art does not present the ordinary things of perception; it does, even when it is abstract, since non-figurative art also uses colors and forms. The major difference with utilitarian perception is that in artistic presentations colors and forms, instead of belonging to and defining objects, manifest for themselves. When sounds, colors, and shapes are attributed to an object, they are used to identify and define said object, both functions signifying nothing but our needs and possible actions. As a result, the color that I see is the color of a house or a car; the sound that I hear is that of thunder or a door. When art unties such qualities from their status of useful predicates, colors, lines, sounds, etc., "recapture their proper force."³⁹ In thus regaining their own life rather than being attributes of underlying objects, they exhibit the animation and intrinsic force that we feel as beauty.

Suppose I continue my inquiry by asking what the door is. I will find other attributes, such as extension, shape, impenetrability, which I say belong to the door until I am left with the idea of the object being nothing more than a support. Aristotle calls this support substance and defines it as "that which is not predicated of a stratum, but of which all else is predicated"⁴⁰ We are familiar with the controversy surrounding the notion of substance. For instance, an empiricist philosopher like John Locke will argue that, understood as a general notion, that is, without the attributes and accidents that it is supposed to support we have "no clear idea of substance in general."⁴¹ As to the idea of particular substances, it is just "a collection of those several ideas of sensible qualities, which we use to find united in the thing called 'horse' or 'stone'."⁴² Since such a collection refers to nothing but the word that we use, the

proof is given that the idea of substance has no ontological standing. Bergson concurs with this analysis, but adds that the notion of an entity to which qualities are attributed is simply expressive of the practical orientation of our mind by which we precisely “set immutability and immobility as essences or substances, as supports.”⁴³ Clearly, in disengaging qualities from a static support, art dissolves thingness and infuses them with life.

Granted this property to instill life, it is also true that, unlike the ambition of intuition, the aesthetic faculty does not claim to provide knowledge. Despite their common character of transcending utility and involving feeling, art “dilates our perception, but on the surface rather than in depth.”⁴⁴ Because art is confined to images and targets the individual, it expands our perception but not our understanding of the world. Philosophical intuition, too, uses images but to think the general. As such, it grasps life in general beyond revealing manifestations of life. It is properly a vision in depth, an insight that goes inside reality in distinction to the method of display characteristic of artistic vision and expression. Whereas art displays and makes palpable the living individual, philosophical intuition goes to the deeper level of vitality, that is, of the inner dynamism of which the living phenomenon is an outward and sensible manifestation. The vision of art is one of laying out, while that of philosophy is one of integration and hence of comprehension in the etymological sense of the word.

Another proof of cognitive differentiation even more pertinent than the presence of an aesthetic faculty is the reality of instinct. The latter does not confirm the possibility of transcending the constraints of utility, as art does, but it goes further in the direction of supporting the existence of different forms of knowledge. Instinct provides knowledge even though it is not of the same nature as that of intelligence. Unlike the mechanical approach of intelligence, instinct seems to continue the organizing work of nature through an internal form of knowledge. This is illustrated, for example, by the way bees in a hive form a perfectly coordinated system as though each bee has an inside knowledge of the other bees. The difference with the knowledge that intelligence provides is obviously that instinctive knowledge does not involve representation. Based on this absence of representation, scholars usually draw the conclusion that instinctive behavior must have some mechanical explanation rather than consider the idea of different modes of knowledge. The same attitude prevails when evolutionary thinking views

instinct as an early, undeveloped form of intelligence on the grounds that instinctive behavior looks like an intelligent act. The reduction of instinct to a primitive and frozen intelligence misses its *sui generis* nature as a non-representative form of knowledge. The essential difference between the two is that instinct, unlike intelligence, does not manufacture; as a continuation of the organizing work of nature, it simply knows how to use specific and available instruments. Consequently, intelligence being inventive expands consciousness, whereas instinct is fixed, specialized, and automatic, and so tends toward unconsciousness. In instinct, knowledge deploys as outward movements; with intelligence, it folds up as representation. This crucial difference shows that instinct and intelligence constitute two divergent ways of achieving the goal of adaption of life.

To speak of divergent development is to recognize the common origin from which instinct and intelligence derive. It is also to admit that the two can never separate fully from each other so that each retains some traces of the other despite their distinct specialization. The common origin of both instinctive and intelligent forms of knowledge can thus be identified as “consciousness in general, and which must be co-extensive with universal life.”⁴⁵ The original property of consciousness to feel itself from inside has crystallized as instinct due to its limitation to a particular organic action on the one hand and, on the other, as intelligence in the form of outwardly directed representation. Therefore, the whole idea of intuitive knowledge amounts to actualizing integral knowledge. Instinct shares with intuition the ability to know from inside, even though its specialization confines it to a particular object and hence to unconsciousness. The opposite is true for intelligence. It expands consciousness but at the same time exchanges its ability to know internally for a representative consciousness more appropriate to act on matter from outside. The path to integral knowledge is thus all mapped out: it is to expand the scope of instinct and, by turning intelligence toward life, to put its reflective ability in the service of an internal knowledge of life. Hence Bergson’s definition of intuition: it is “instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely.”⁴⁶

The diversity of knowledge enables us to resolve the problem of the connection between science and philosophy. If there is only one type of knowledge, either science is not true knowledge or philosophy is not knowledge on its own, or science and philosophy are both relative. The first position is usually that of idealism while the second is typically

representative of positivism. The various forms of skepticism and constructivist epistemologies advance the idea that human knowledge, be it scientific or philosophical, is inherently relative. Embedded in this debate is the issue of the ontological unity of reality. For materialism, since whatever is real is a manifestation of matter, there can only be one form of knowledge, namely, the scientific one. In the case of radical idealism, since whatever exists is a mental phenomenon, scientific knowledge is just a notation of regularities and true explanation is incumbent on philosophy. Still another essential school of thought is dualism: though it defends the existence of two different substances and the legitimacy of both philosophy and scientific knowledge, it holds an inconsistent position by considering the rational method as common to both of them. As to those theories that avoid the issue of the ontological determination of reality, they have no other choice than to admit relativity as the inevitable characteristic of human knowledge in all its manifestations.

The Bergsonian idea of epistemological diversity allows a different approach by authorizing the conclusion that different forms of knowledge can be equally and objectively valid, without thereby reducing philosophy to science or relativizing science or subjectivizing both philosophy and science. This is the point that some critics miss when they charge Bergson of being an opponent of both science and intelligence. Even those who like Sanford Schwartz take into account the existence of two different modes of knowledge speak of “inconsistency,” since “the intellect is reduced to a purely instrumental faculty that distorts reality in the very process of ordering it,” while the ability to reach absolute knowledge is accorded to intuition.⁴⁷ To pinpoint inconsistency or a frankly anti-science attitude is to forget that Bergsonian epistemological diversity is backed by an ontological view defining reality by two movements inverse of each other, the ascending vital movement and the descending trend of materiality. Though distinguishable, the two movements are not external to each other and so constitute by their unity the tension that is internally characteristic of reality (more will be said on this issue in Chapter 3).

It follows that science, whose object is materiality, can perfectly deliver an absolute knowledge without this knowledge being comprehensive. To the extent that reality is not reducible to materiality, scientific knowledge is only a partial view of reality. But “partial” does not mean relative or non-objective; it means incomplete in the sense of not integrating the other complementary tendency of reality, to wit, the vital movement.

In defending the idea of different forms of knowledge, all Bergson says is that a mere extension of the scientific method to the complementary tendency will not do the job because of the difference in kind between the two movements of reality. Such an extension simply offers a distorted, mechanical translation of vital operations, with the consequence that science “becomes relative only if it claims, such as it is, to present to us life.”⁴⁸ Precisely, the idea of epistemological diversity avoids the confusion between science and philosophy by delineating the field proper to each discipline. Science uses the method of spatialization for the purpose of conquering nature. This practical purpose of science does not operate in an arbitrary way. Science touches on the absolute because matter lends itself to spatialization, which is expressive of its inherent tendency. This very success establishes the need for a different approach following the increasingly arbitrary nature of science’s formulas when it deals with complex vital and spiritual phenomena. The intuitive method of philosophy responds to a call for an integral knowledge, that is, for a vision that neither reduces materiality to spirit nor spirit to materiality, nor keeps the two separate. As inversion, intuition achieves integral knowledge by gathering what intelligence separates and juxtaposes into a single vision. In other words, intuition is how intelligence transcends its own limitation resulting from its practical focus on materiality by inverting its gaze toward itself and ascending the slope of the total reality.

INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE AS IDEAL GENESIS

Now is the time to answer the remaining and pressing question of how intuition knows. One thing is absolutely sure: when Bergson speaks of inward knowledge, he does not mean that our consciousness literally identifies with the external object. The other term that Bergson uses to define intuition, namely, “sympathy,” clarifies that coincidence does not mean identification. To be sure, the common understanding of sympathy conveys the ability to share the feelings of other people, without thereby the sharing person losing his/her original demarcation. Yet, though distinction is not erased, the feelings of other people are not given as objects, since the sharing person feels them inside his/her person. We have a coincidence that is also relation, not the relation of a subject to an object, but of a subject feeling in itself the “object.” No longer being kept at a distance, the object invades the subject, and so is not an object in the ordinary sense of the word.

It springs to mind that one person can share the feelings of another person because they partake of the same nature. But then, how is a sympathetic relation possible where there is no common nature, as in the case of the consciousness of a self and organic life, not to mention materiality? The answer to the question is, of course, duration. As will be detailed in the coming chapters, duration is the common substance from which derive all the manifestations of reality. In principle, then, human consciousness should be able to enter into a sympathetic relation with all the manifestations of reality, including materiality. However, this possibility is blocked by the necessities of action: distancing turns the manifestations of reality into opaque and sealed things. Since the operation is like throwing a cover on the manifestations, it impedes the direct access to their inner life. What the cover hides behind the appearance of thingness is movements as the inner essence of whatever is real. Intuition, in the profound words of Bento Prado, is the “aptitude to grasp the object in the movement that carries it to being and not in its inertia of being already constituted.”⁴⁹ Since I have the inner feeling of the movements that I execute, it is clear that I can have the same inner feeling if I perform the movements of what I see as external to me. For example, remove the cover of distinct and juxtaposed objects, and you have the vision of materiality as “numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and traveling in every direction like shivers through an immense body.”⁵⁰ Bergson adds that the vision is obtained by “that undivided act which our consciousness becomes aware of in our own movements.”⁵¹ The shivers that I feel subsequent to a sensation of undoing when I reduce my inner tension to the maximum point of détente is the enactment that reveals the inside of materiality.

The involvement of action attests that intuition is neither contemplation nor a theoretical representation. According to the felicitous expression of Frédéric Worms, it is “*a gaze that is itself a doing*.”⁵² Since instead of simply encountering the object, intuition generates it, the vision and the content become contemporaneous and seeing moves from objectification to creation by being one with doing. John Mullarkey gives an equally apt characterization when he defines intuition by “the power by which one subject is able to adjust itself to the alterity of the object (a changing process) by *recreating* its movement within itself.... This re-creation is *not a representation*—it is a performance, an action.”⁵³ Indeed, knowledge from inside cannot be anything other than

the generation of the object, not in its actual materiality, which would require a divine power, but as an enactment of the movement that brings it into existence. In effect, Bergson characterizes intuition as a “generating thought,” that is, as a thinking that has no parallel with the way intelligence operates even when it speaks of generation.⁵⁴ What intelligence calls genesis follows the model of manufacture, which is the model of reconstituting the object by assembling its distinct elements, like a watch is put together after being disassembled into distinct parts. The error of the method is that, far from generating, the parts presuppose the whole so that it starts from “the already made reality in order to reconstitute the principle by going from the present to the past,” instead of following the temporal order of creation, of indivisible and interpenetrating continuity.⁵⁵ Bergson particularly emphasizes the difference between the order of creation and the order of manufacture when he accuses Herbert Spencer’s method of “reconstructing evolution with fragments of the evolved.”⁵⁶

The process of intelligence from the present to the past confirms that the intuitive approach alone is able to think creation. The latter defies the main intellectualist assumption, namely, that any event or occurrence is a predictable effect, the premises of which are found in the past. To be sure, when creation is represented, it appears to be the outcome of antecedent factors, of prior causes in which it is contained as effect. In appearing as a given in a causal process, its novelty, that by which it is creation, evaporates. Not so with the temporal order of intuition: its creative performance does not separate moments as cause and effect, any more than it separates the past from the present. It acknowledges the indivisible continuity of the process, that is, the prolongation of the past into the present—rather than the breakup of temporal order into distinct moments—for the simple reason that it is performing it. The change in the process is not effect, but a qualitative change in which nothing is distinctly cause or distinctly effect because it originates from the indivisible continuity of the enactment. As a result, what is offered to the intuitive vision is uninterrupted novelty, not the unfolding of a determined causal process.

From the active and non-representative nature of intuitive knowledge follows its reluctance to use the essential tools of representative knowledge, to wit, words and concepts. The fundamental reason for not using such tools is that reality in itself can be neither expressed nor symbolized

without being objectified or represented. To the extent that words and concepts are the tools of intelligence, their significance is essentially practical. The traditional belief that concepts derive their veracity from their correspondence with reality overlooks the fact that their role is not so much to reveal the real as to give it a practical form. One essential operation by which the real becomes an object of practice is through a form of representation diluting the fundamental heterogeneity and fluidity of reality in favor of similitudes and stable relations. Thus, as already intimated, the use of the same word to a number of things underlines what they have in common to the detriment of their individual differences. The concept goes further in the work of generalization by abstracting common properties that are said to belong to the universal and fixed essence of a category of things.

While the use of words and concepts is characteristic of representational subject-object distinction, the overcoming of the distinction means that revelation by an act of coincidence manifests as feeling, thereby dispensing with words and concepts. Nonetheless, the intuition in question being that of an intelligent being, the achieved vision must assume an intellectual vestment. This necessity of adapting to the requirements of an intelligent being entails that “intuition, like all thought, finally becomes lodged in concepts.”⁵⁷ The best that one can do is to avoid the symbolic nature of pure intellectual concepts, which is a consequence of their practical function, by creating concepts that are attuned to the heterogeneity, fluidity, and undulations of reality, concepts that are therefore “flexible, mobile, almost fluid representations, always ready to mold themselves on the fleeting forms of intuition.”⁵⁸ These characteristics can be injected into the rigid and abstract nature of concepts by means of imageries. The concrete nature of images is more in tune with what vision can offer; moreover, images are more flexible and fluid than abstract concepts, and so better suited to express the mobility and heterogeneity of reality. Intuitive “concepts” retain the generality of concepts but avoid their abstractness and rigidity by using imagery. Tension, détente, contraction, élan, melodic structure, etc., are some examples of Bergson’s fluid notions.

Now, do intuitive concepts have a simple metaphoric value or do they express the inner structure of things? The question makes sense, since we are dealing with notions conveying images. The ordinary answer would be to say that, as images, their function is to illustrate and facilitate the

understanding of ideas so that there is no congruence between these images and the reality they illustrate. However, a different answer is possible if we keep in mind that intuitive knowledge provides a vision rather than an abstract understanding. As already noted, vision is not as unfit to images as is abstract thinking. On the other hand, it would be incorrect to postulate a congruence or identity between the images and the deep reality, given that the images are taken from the already fashioned visible reality.

The truth is that the fluid notions are expressive of reality but not in the sense of similarity, which only applies to static objects. As the movements of leaves indicate the direction of the wind, fluid concepts capture the kind of mobility that animates the inner reality. A fluid notion is thus more than a metaphor, which is just a figure of speech suggesting a resemblance that is not literal. It expresses a vision of reality by giving a sense of its inner mobility. Unlike a metaphor, it is an “imagery in language which knowingly expresses the literal meaning,” to use Bergson’s expression.⁵⁹ For instance, Bergson often expresses the enduring essence of the self by using musical imagery because the latter gives us the vision of an interpenetrating and indistinct succession. The image does not convey a resemblance, but rather a direct insight into the comportment of inner life. It is because music echoes the inner murmur of the self that it has such power over us. Such would not have been the case if music were simply a metaphor with a purely illustrative function. Illustration does not induce emotion; the latter requires a felt occurrence. Consider the concept of vital *élan*: it is an image but it also expresses a generality. As such, it is more than a mere metaphor and less than an abstract duplicate of reality. It is not an abstract duplicate because it is an enactment or performance; it is more than a metaphor because it is actually experienced, felt. Its other feature is precision in that it is suggestive of the kind of movement that accounts for the creativity of life, a movement that is neither causation nor attraction. Whereas causality and finality are ready-made concepts suited to the techniques of intelligence, the vital *élan* is a concept tailored to an actual experience. The form of knowledge that replaces viewpoints and symbols by fluid notions achieves precision because the notions derive from a state of coincidence with reality. Instead of representing the object, it feels the palpitation of its inner reality by an attitude of “*auscultation*” rather than analysis.⁶⁰

INVERSION AND FALSE PROBLEMS

The analysis of how intuition knows cannot be complete unless we show concretely how intuition inverts intelligence. In this regard, Bergson provides enough instances displaying the intuitive method in action. To illustrate, I present the case of false problems, which are, according to Bergson, responsible for the failures of metaphysics, notably for the generation of its unsolvable antinomies. Where Kant and Bergson undeniably agree is on the tragedy of human intelligence. Both say that, though metaphysical questions are of the highest interest, they invariably lead reason into the dead-end of unsolvable antinomies. The tragedy is that intelligence reaches the impasses, not because of some wrong observation or reasoning that could be corrected, but by following the natural course of its thinking. Bergson concurs with Kant's analysis, but not with the explanation. While for Kant antinomies result from reason overstepping its limitations by using its concepts outside experience, for Bergson, as we saw, the problem is not due to the overstepping of some limit, but to the attempt to go beyond the practical realm without using the proper instrument, namely, intuition.

It follows that Bergson's first and main concern is not so much about metaphysical theories as about the problems leading to the theories. He had enough reason to assume that the explanation for the numerous contradictions hampering the progress of metaphysics is that its problems are either false or incorrectly formulated problems. Because metaphysics is dealing with botched problems, it is not surprising that it is unable to solve them. As Deleuze explains, commenting on the intuitive method, "a speculative problem is solved as soon as it is properly stated."⁶¹ Deleuze adds that the real problems are not simply hidden and waiting to be discovered: it is actually about "inventing" them.⁶² The single explanation for the existence of false and incorrectly stated problems and for the need to invent the real problems is the practical function of intelligence, that is, its natural inclination to pose and solve metaphysical problems in accordance to its practical orientation. The use of concepts tailored for practical life to pose and solve speculative questions can hardly escape the risk of generating false problems. Take the idea of nothingness, which is a fundamental, if not the fundamental, issue of metaphysics. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, practical life is driven by desires and so constantly deals with absences and shortages. However, when the practical meaning of nothing is transposed to

the speculative realm, it generates the problem of why there is something and not nothing (more is said on this issue in the coming chapters). Could one think of a problem that is as abstract and unsolvable as the attempt to derive existence from nothingness once nothing is accorded logical precedence over being? The idea of disorder is another example: while it makes perfectly sense that I speak of disorder each time I do not find the order that I expect, its metaphysical usage calls for the impossible task of explaining the presence of order by originating it from a preceding—at least in principle—disorder. The task seems legitimate to reason because, unlike order, disorder does not appear to require explanation. Similarly, for an acting intelligent being, the representation of a goal precedes its actual realization. However, transposed to the metaphysical level, the precedence gives birth to the idea that the real existed as possible before being real, the consequence of which is that everything is determined and freedom as well as creation are just illusions.

Since false problems and their insolubility derive from an illegitimate use of the categories of intelligence, the primary issue of metaphysics is to pose real questions. In turn, the formulation of real problems depends on the effort to transcend the categories of intelligence, which can only happen by an act of creation. This means that the path leading to the posing of real problems transpires when the shortcomings of intelligence, those by which it gets lost in false problems, are first exposed and explained. This critical work indicates how the problem must be posed to overcome the errors and contradictions of intelligence. Herein lies the creative moment, that is, in the very effort to get out of the impasses of intelligence, given that the effort to formulate the real problem succeeds to the extent that it harbors the solution. The right problem is precisely a feasible problem, as opposed to the false one, to the one that has no solution. The second moment of this intuitive process is the provision of an experimental verification of the solution through the enactment delivering a vision. The successful generation of the vision provides a seeing that it is also a doing, an insight that is at the same time creation.

Consider the case of mechanism and finalism. Both theories reach an impasse because they explain the living organism in terms of manufacture, the first appealing to a blind process, the second to the realization of a plan. Plainly, the impasse would be overcome if the problem is posed in terms of a movement that is neither blind nor planned. Not only does the term “*élan*” satisfy the two requirements, but it also provides the kind of internal process liable to engender a complex organism without

having recourse to the model of manufacture. To visualize the process, consider a sensation of effort encountering an inward resistance (it could be the effort to lift an arm that resists at the same time). As the effort continues, the sensation spreads internally and progressively to the resisting component along the lines of its contours and inner compartments. We have a complex outcome subsequent to the adaptation of the effort to the nature of the resisting component. Clearly, the outcome is neither planned nor mechanically obtained, having nothing to do with the construction of an organism by assembling parts, be it mechanically or by design. Instead, the successive configurations of the spreading of the sensation of effort suggest that the complex outcome is not built but results from the much simpler act of getting around an inward obstacle. Once we exclude both intelligent design and mechanical procedure, what else remains but the configuration by which a force or *élan* circumvents an inner obstruction?

The intuitive method clearly relies on the most important lesson that Bergson takes from Kant, which is that the antinomies of reason cannot be solved by proposing another theory obtained through the same rational method. The history of philosophy shows that the dialectical approach amplifies the confrontation of theories but does not end it, obvious as it is that “any attempt at purely conceptual philosophy calls forth antagonistic efforts, and ... in the field of pure dialectics there is no system to which one cannot oppose another.”⁶³ What is required to advance metaphysics is not the negation of previous theories followed by another equally negatable system, but the inversion of the path hitherto followed. What we have said regarding false or incorrectly formulated problems implies that the inversion occurs in two steps. The first is the step of matching up opposed theories to bring out their common assumption, since their very opposition presupposes that they share the same belief. The exposure of the “false assumption concealed in the very way they phrased the question,” enables Bergson “to attack the root of the problem.”⁶⁴ When the same assumption leads to contradictory views that are equally consistent and defensible, as are the great philosophical systems, we have an *impasse*, which is a clear indication of the inadequacy of the direction of thought rather than of the presence of some committed errors. Since the *impasse* denotes that inappropriate means are used, it suggests that the only way out is by inverting the path so far followed.

The second step involves the creative work of formulating the real problem in such a way that it fosters the solution. What we have

said so far suggests that the spatial form of thinking is responsible for generating false problems. Though the thinking is successful in its practical dealing with materiality, it engenders contradictions and antinomies when applied to the realm of metaphysics. Now to inverse is to change direction, but toward what? The answer is obvious: it is toward duration in the very sense of posing speculative problems in terms of duration rather than space. Take the conflict between determinists and defenders of free will. Both share the spatial conception according to which our inner life is composed of distinct and juxtaposed states. This spatial representation is the very one that turns freedom into a badly stated problem. The determinist argues for a causal connection between the distinct states, while the defender of freedom maintains that it is by choice that one direction of action is selected. Since more arguments by each school will not settle the issue, there is an impasse that requires the complete reformulation of the problem. What else could reformulate the problem but the idea of duration, of the indivisible and dynamic interpenetration of our inner states? This vision of duration excludes any mechanical outcome as well as the intervention of an arbitrary choice picking one direction among other possibilities. Instead, it presents freedom (which will be discussed further in the next chapter) as an act of creation. Another example is the notion of vital *élan*. It is a temporal vision enabling the thinking of the evolution of life as creative, as opposed to mechanism and finalism, which appeal to a mode of thinking reproducing the model of fabrication. To say that the living organism is the realization of a plan or the result of a mechanical causality is to reject creation, that is, the idea of the unpredictable novelty of the evolutionary process. By separating and juxtaposing the different forms of life we lose sight of the unity and continuity of life, whose consequence is that we are left with all the difficulties of a mechanical or teleological account of the evolution of life. By contrast, the durational conception of evolution provides us with a dynamic process inscribed in the continuity and interpenetrating attribute of duration. In other words, it gives us an *élan* that creates living forms instead of fabricating them.

CROSSING LIMITATIONS

What we have said so far establishes two interrelated features of intuition: (1) to think intuitively is to inverse the natural course of our thinking; and (2) said inversion is none other than to think in duration.

The obvious connection between the two features is that both require effort. Just as inverting our natural way of thinking, thinking in duration cannot occur without effort, since to think intuitively is to blend moments of duration instead of juxtaposing them. As such, the path to duration passes through the effort of concentration while that of juxtaposing is one of relaxation. As intensification, intuition neither analyzes nor explains, as intelligence does, and so needs the latter “to be explicated into representations and actions.”⁶⁵ Instead, intuition yields feeling, but a feeling that is creative in that it generates what it shows, as opposed to the passivity of ordinary feeling. Describing what is needed to coincide with the absolute, Bergson says consciousness

must detach itself from the *already-made* and attach itself to the *being-made*. It needs that, turning back on itself and twisting on itself, the faculty of *seeing* should be made to be one with the act of *willing*—a painful effort which we can make suddenly, doing violence to our nature, but cannot sustain more than a few moments.⁶⁶

We must keep in mind that the intuitive method is an enactment, an ideal genesis: no matter the amount of effort exerted, human intuition cannot go beyond sympathy and ontologically generate life or materiality. Even so, the requirement of an effort specifically defined as “painful” and “doing violence to our nature” sufficiently establishes that intuition is neither a wishful thinking nor a mysterious revelation. It is a vision obtained by going against what is natural to us and by effecting an extremely trying action.

The need to inverse our natural way of thinking comes from the fact that, though increasingly successful in our practical relations with the world, we encounter constant failures in our attempts to find answers to questions that are of the highest interest to us. To the extent that these failures indicate that intelligence is not up to the task, they reveal our limitations. Limitation is a theme on which Kant and Bergson agree. According to the former, the critique of reason has “established our unavoidable ignorance of things in themselves, and has limited all that we can theoretical know to mere appearances.”⁶⁷ For Bergson, however, rather than being a definitive impossibility to which we must resign ourselves, limitation is by definition meant to be challenged. How could it be otherwise since knowing our limitation is somehow already going beyond it? Moreover, is not progress itself made of

breakthroughs moving beyond obstacles considered previously impassable? Consequently, the demarcation of our limitation is a call to overcome it by increasing our effort, not a reason to accept it. In the same vein, the concept of limitation does not authorize the conclusion that our knowledge is relative. As already argued, to say that our knowledge is limited does not mean that it deals with appearances; it simply means that what we know is real but limited, that is, not complete so that we must make the effort to expand it. As Mullarkey says, “while the relative implies a lost absolute, the limited opens itself up to the whole.”⁶⁸

The definition of intuition as inversion of intelligence delivers exactly the kind of effort needed to push back our limitations. Since the limitations of our senses and the non-speculative orientation of our intelligence originate from the need to frame and support our possible actions, the effort to overcome these limitations consists essentially in transcending their utilitarian function. Just as in esthetics the reward for disinterestedness is the creation and appreciation of beauty, similarly philosophy accedes the true nature of reality when it transcends the form of thinking deriving from the practical exigencies of life. Since the distance that separates us from the world and the objects is due to their already given being, the only way to overcome the separation is by ideally engendering reality instead of merely encountering it.

When the notion of limit does not have the Kantian meaning of inaccessibility in that it does not implicate an ontological beyond, it becomes a frontier that is susceptible of being expanded. Since what is outside the limit is of the same nature as what is inside, the effort to push back is properly defined as expansion, better still as a “work of integration.”⁶⁹ This means that intuition works with a given but limited and subjectivized contact with reality, and the whole work of integration consists first in removing the subjective veil and then in including in the same vision what lies beyond the immediately given. The removal of the subjective veil places us at what Bergson calls “the *turn* of experience,” which shows “the passage from the *immediate* to the *useful*.”⁷⁰ Once the immediate is cleared of the useful, the work of integration of what is beyond the limit can proceed since it is of the same nature as the immediate or pure experience. The integration is effected by enactment: leaning on the small elements of the immediate portion of the real curve, enactment reconstitutes “the curve itself stretching out into the darkness behind them.”⁷¹ This work of purification and enlargement of experience intimates that the term “metaphysics” is not a happy designation.

As Bergson sees it, the object of metaphysics is not so much what is beyond the physical as the de-subjectification and extension of what is given in experience.

The de-subjectification of our perceptual contact with materiality provides a typical illustration of the intuitive work. As mere detection of our possible action in the things themselves, pure perception delivers the immediate contact with materiality prior to the turn of experience toward the useful. As a selection, it is limited, but not subjective. However, the problem is the intervention of memory, since it is that by which perception turns into representation, into a subjectivized display. Memory is not merely the ability to recall past events and perceptions; it is the fundamental attribute by which our consciousness is endowed with a certain level of tension. Consciousness contracts our immediate contact with materiality in accordance with its inner tension. The outcome is that movements are immobilized into qualitatively differentiated objects (more will be said on the connection between memory and perception in Chapter 4). Therefore, to expand pure perception is to get out of the characteristic tension of our memory so as to coincide by enactment with the incomparably more diluted duration of matter. It is to feel all tension vanishing in favor of a spreading movement that is so rapid that, as previously alluded, it turns into countless vibrations. The decrease of tension means that the sensible qualities of things, such as colors and sounds, lose their intensity and come close to quantitatively homogeneous vibrations on the spot. This intuitive vision through an enactment effectively experiencing a precipitous drop of tension does make the case for what is meant by the expansion of the original and immediate contact with materiality.

On the other hand, the inverse effort by which tension is progressively regained is an act of condensation where homogeneity diminishes in favor of intensification actualized as sensation. What is merely spreading is losing intensity and, by the same token, the ability to be sensed. By contrast, what is no longer spreading while continuing to swell, how else could it exist but as sensation? As condensation increasingly blends its content, the tension reaches the point of non-spatiality, which is none other than the level of the conscious self or indistinct, virtual heterogeneity. Though in the self everything is contemporaneous to everything else, the practical orientation of consciousness rejects into the unconsciousness whatever is not of immediate interest to the living body. As a result, only those events and perceptions that can be useful to the living

present are actualized as memory-images. Between the extreme détente of materiality and the higher level of tension of the self, there is the vital élan, which is a break strong enough to effect a volte-face but not powerful and distinct enough to inverse the direction of materiality (see Chapter 3). In default of changing direction, the élan turns into a current running through matter and carving those organisms by which it achieves growing levels of tension by circumventing the undoing nature of materiality.

Intuition defined as the effort to overcome subjectivity, henceforth associated with the useful, confirms the opposition of Bergsonism to any kind of philosophy rooted in human subjectivity. As Paola Marrati rightly notes, Bergsonism “is neither a humanistic or existential philosophy, nor a transcendental philosophy.”⁷² In fact, turning his back on all philosophy that wallows in subjectivity, Bergson expressly says that “philosophy should be an effort to go beyond the human state.”⁷³ The reason is that for Bergson the human is not the end of evolution, but the best that evolution has accomplished given the circumstances. It is incumbent on the human to continue to perfect itself, and it can do so only under the condition that it ceases to treat itself as an end. Intuition is precisely the effort to unite what evolution had to separate into instinct and intelligence to achieve progress. Paradoxical as it may seem, Bergson shares Nietzsche’s view of the human as “something that must be overcome.”⁷⁴ Sure enough, the paradox is that the overcoming goes in opposite directions for the two thinkers. Whereas for Nietzsche the overcoming aims at accepting and deepening our worldliness, for Bergson true overcoming is not the downward direction of earthly self-overcoming, but the upward path of the intensification of spirituality.

It is on the basis of the human as an unfinished product that Bergson—who served as the elected president of the London based Society for Psychical Research—encourages the scientific study of mental faculties considered as abnormal, such as various parapsychological phenomena and mystic experience. For him, the rush to characterize these phenomena as manifestations of irrationality or insanity completely misses the fact that intelligence is just a crystallization of a much larger mental capability. The aptitudes considered as abnormal are rare, not because they are alien to us, but because they are blocked by the practical orientation of our mind. They manifest here and there in certain individuals when some distraction of nature occurs. That is why psychology must pay attention to such rarities instead of discarding them as

fictions. Deep inside the tendency to reject, we find the same belief that the human is a finished product that we can embellish in various ways but not transform.

This invitation to complete the works of nature invalidates those critics who consider Bergson as an opponent of intelligence. Bergson does not see intuition as a substitute for intelligence, but “as another complementary direction of thought.”⁷⁵ Nor does he deny the competence of intelligence in the field that is proper to its methods, namely, materiality. What he wants is a collaborative work between intuition and intelligence, whereby alone we can have the complete view of reality needed to answer metaphysical questions. The collaboration is effected through the inversion of intelligence, which inversion is how intelligence goes back to its source and becomes, not only a seeing intent on using matter from outside, but also a seeing that is generative, that is, in which the thinking and the object thought coincide. In short, the effort to inverse intelligence achieves, it is true for a fleeting moment, what can be called an intuitive intelligence, as opposed to the fabricating one. So that, as the attempt to overcome human limitations, intuition ascertains the centrality of the notion of effort to the Bergsonian philosophy. The next chapter will develop this idea further, notably by showing that duration is a creative force because it is not merely the passing time but the very origination of effort.

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CHAPTER 3

Duration and Self-Striving

What stands out in Henri Bergson's conception of time is the distancing from the commonly shared view of time as a passing, transient phenomenon, immortalized in the lamenting words of the poet: "O time, suspends your flight."¹ In the eyes of Bergson, passing is precisely what real time cannot do, as it rolls on itself forming a continuous, persistent flow. Rather than transiency, its true nature is duration, which then denotes the presence of effort since it perseveres while swelling. In manifesting the being-made as opposed to the transient, the correct understanding of Bergson's notion of duration highly depends on a thorough critical review of what so far had passed for time.

IN SEARCH OF TRUE TIME

Though time is the inseparable companion of our existence, the attempt to define it has plunged philosophy into sharp and endless controversies. Early Greek philosophy struggled with the issue. Parmenides denied the reality of becoming, while Heraclitus took the opposite position of questioning permanence by immersing everything in a universal flux. To overcome the controversy, Plato placed the immutability of Forms in a higher world, thereby downgrading the visible world of becoming to the level of appearance. Prior to the modern world, Augustine lamented about the perplexing nature of time: "If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know," he famously said.²

Modern philosophy does not do a better job in deciphering the nature of time. Take the case of Descartes: having endorsed the indefinite divisibility of time, he could not avoid the doctrine of continuous creation. As he himself says, “from my having existed a little while ago it does not follow that I need exist now, unless some cause creates me anew at this very moment, in other words preserves me.”³ The divisibility of time, that is, the fact that time appears to be composed of distinct and passing instants turns the continuation and conservation of things into such an opaque mystery that they seem to require nothing less than God’s continuous creation. Kant will go further in divesting things of duration by turning time into a form of perception, thereby delivering the final blow to the common belief that things occur in an objectively given time. The trend of confining time to subjectivity will be taken up by phenomenology, with the added correction that time is not so much a form as an intentional act by which the consciousness of presence is formed in interplay with the constitution of past and future temporal instances.

Apart from a difference in formulation, the premodern relegation of time to mere appearance and the modern confinement of time to the sphere of subjectivity are not too far off from each other. In both cases, time does not objectively affect reality. In the first case, being devoid of the attribute of immutability or eternity, becoming is not a true, full being; in the second case, having to do with the representation of a subject, time remains external to the objective determinations of things. In thus banishing time from the substance of things, both positions lay the groundwork for the view of the determinist scientist and philosopher according to which time has no impact on reality because everything is already given. Time simply unfolds what is already given, and this is in full accord with the claim of causal explanation, namely, that the effect is contained in the cause. The view that occurrence is just the unfolding of an already given reality found its best expression in Pierre-Simon Laplace’s famous statement:

an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it—an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis—it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.⁴

Let no one object that our short overview of the dealings of philosophy with time is not fair, that it excludes, for instance, the Hegelian dialectics, which describes becoming in positive terms. Without denying the originality and complexity of dialectics, one must admit that the incorporation of negativity does not elevate the ontological status of time. The negative simply serves as a motor to a process defined by the coincidence between the beginning and the end. In the words of G. W. F. Hegel, "Becoming is only the explicit statement of what Being is in its truth."⁵ The understanding of becoming as explicitation of what is implicitly given does no more than add a negative ingredient to the view of time as an unfolding process.

The full scope of Bergson's dissent stands out with one single statement: "time is real."⁶ But what does it mean for time to be real? For sure, it means that time is neither an appearance nor a subjective frame nor a merely unfolding mechanism. It is real only to the extent that it does or achieves something, that is, to the extent that it is endowed with its own efficacy. The corollary of this endowment is that time must not be identified with representation, given that the identification can only lead to a subjectivist interpretation of time. Of course, there is no denying that time is an object of representation, but one must make sure that what is represented is real time. To use a Kantian language, we may need to distinguish between time as phenomenon and time in the sense of noumenon. In Bergsonian terms, the difference respectively corresponds to the distinction between spatialized time and duration.

Let me hasten to add that the attempt to clarify Bergsonian notions by using Kantian terms has an absolute limit. For Kant, since our relation with the world passes through time as an organ of representation, our mind has no access to a different time. Not so with Bergson, who argues forcefully for the availability of a different and authentic experience of time, which he terms "duration." Even if the Kantian time delineates our normal condition, Bergson maintains that we can overcome our limitation and access the deeper reality if we make the necessary effort to disengage from the representative attitude. In fact, Bergson has given us a precise indication of what we need to do to access time as duration. Neither esoteric nor mysterious, "pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states."⁷ Even though letting our ego live does not seem to require any effort, the attempt to hold back the tendency of juxtaposing our inner states necessitates that we resist a natural bent.

TOWARDS A DYNAMIC CONCEPTION OF TIME

To the question of knowing what is required to endow time with efficacy, the answer is of course that time must not be a homogeneous medium rolling out an already-made reality. In what is rolling out, events occur one after the other and this sequential attribute of time generates a representation of continuity that is made up of juxtaposed and immobile elements. In this fragmented or juxtaposing continuity, one moment is, as Descartes says, separate from the next moment so that the continuity realizes a line-up rather than a cohesive, solidary whole. Be it noted that when science speaks of time, it does not propose a different conception; it simply gives a more systematic and precise formulation of the prevailing view. Indeed, whether it deals with life or inert matter, science

proceeds to break up its object into a multiplicity of homogeneous and discontinuous parts, each representing a static and instantaneous view, and reconstitutes the whole by juxtaposing the separate parts. The moving, changing reality is thus translated into a series of immobilities placed side by side in space.⁸

These immobilities serve the purpose of quantification from which science draws its precision and predictive competence.

We will move toward a more dynamic conception if, instead of lining up, we integrate and merge the moments of time. In effect, the defining feature of duration, that which radically separates it from what is commonly and philosophically identified as time is, in Bergson's eyes, the "uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future."⁹ Prolongation means a continuity that does not juxtapose, a succession that rolls up instead of unrolling and, as a result, grows internally. A continuity that is not divisible in countless distinct and juxtaposed parts does not need to be recreated at each moment. Instead, fusion, interpenetration, realizes a continuity that is one and multiple at the same time, and so truly endures. Because the interpenetration of elements leaves nothing the same, such a time does not simply unfold what is already given. On the contrary, it activates a dynamic, constantly changing continuity.

The conversion of duration as interpenetration into time understood as a homogenous medium in which moments are lined up is not hard to explain. The disparity between the two originates from two different

attitudes to the same reality: the one is the lived continuity, the other is the represented continuity. As a representation, the latter involves a spatialized time and, as such, is describable in spatial terms. In what is lining up, distinct, indefinitely divisible, and countable moments appear because, as is in the case of numbers, one moment becomes distinct from another moment by the place it occupies in a spatialized time. The clock that measures time thus counts simultaneities, points in space, which represent virtual stoppages. Counting separate and divisible points in time is certainly an operation that disregards the flux constituted by the fusion of moments, characteristic of lived duration.

The modification that representation imparts to duration reveals the function of spatialization. The dissolution of the flux into distinct, identical, and countable moments gives our experience a uniform, fixed, and measurable form. It is how duration is objectified for the great benefit of our practical connection with the world, given that we have to fix things in order to act on them. Take the case of Zeno of Elea. Analyzing the understanding of movement as a spatial displacement, he rightly notes that the interval separating two points being infinitely divisible can never be crossed. However, Zeno wrongly concludes that movement is impossible when, instead, he should have questioned the identification of movement with the space traversed. What is impossible is not movement, but the attempt to reconstitute movement with immobilities, which, in turn, rests on the confusion between the representation of movement and how movement occurs. The points that are traversed do not indicate how movement takes place, but responds to our practical inquiries asking “where the mobile is to be found, where it will be, where it will *pass*.”¹⁰

The difference between movement as change of place and movement as duration is clear enough. The first indicates virtual halts of the mobile; the second is movement in action stemming from the continuous merging of moments. While the blending of moments shows that movement is actually a change of state, the perception of the change of state as a spatial displacement localizes a mobile thing and presents the qualitative change as a uniform course displaying distinct moments that are measurable and predictable. According to Bergson, the qualitative nature of movement refutes the paradoxes of Zeno. To take one example, the identification of movement with the space traversed assigns a uniform movement to Achilles and the tortoise and prompts the conclusion that the former cannot overtake the latter. The mistake originates from the attempt to reconstitute “Achilles’ whole movement, not

with Achilles' kind of step, but with the tortoise's kind."¹¹ In a word, Achilles overtakes the tortoise because the two movements are qualitatively different.

If spatialization veils the nature of external movements, then how much more distorting will it be when applied to internal psychological states? The projection of spatialized time fragments our internal life into distinct states that juxtapose and form a line. From this misconception arises the associationist conception of the mind: once the mind is divided into distinct states juxtaposed in a homogenous medium, its unity can only be attributed to the association of disparate and frozen components. Evidently, some such unity has nothing to do with the experience of the "concrete and living self," which is one of heterogeneity of an indivisible unity.¹² A related mistaken belief is the propensity to refer to inner states in terms of magnitude, as when we say that one desire, one joy, or one's love is stronger than another. Yet, terms like "increase" and "decrease" are hardly appropriate, since a stronger desire or joy is not composed of a sum of smaller desires or joys, as a bigger number is comprised of smaller numbers. This is not to say that inner states are not capable of growth or decline, but that one must make sure that these expressions have nothing to do with magnitude. The proper term to designate change that does not involve magnitude is intensity, which then denotes qualitative change, that is, what is lived, and not what is represented. Intensity results from the merger of states. Therefore, the increasing intensity of a psychological state is not the same state increasing in size, but a qualitatively changing state as it blends with other states, thereby altering "the whole of our psychic states."¹³

Only the immersion of inner life in real duration can correct the mistaken views of associationism and the quantitative determination of mental states. The melting of inner states into one another generates an indistinct multiplicity, as opposed to the distinct multiplicity of spatial presentation. It thus excludes the need to conceive the unity of the self as an association of static and disparate states. The constant interpenetration of psychological states yields a self that is both one and heterogeneous. The same interpenetration accounts for the change in intensity of mental states. Thus, when a feeling of joy, at first weak, grows in intensity, it does not mean that it augments quantitatively, but that "little by little it permeates a larger number of psychic elements, tingeing them, so to speak, with its own color."¹⁴ This irradiation constitutes a qualitative change, as evidenced by the fact that our attitudes toward surrounding

things are subsequently altered. Similarly, when the successive sounds of a bell reach my ears and I refrain from counting them, instead of one sound being juxtaposed to another, the succession seems to combine into a musical air. In place of many distinct sounds, their merger into one another composes a continuity of a qualitative nature.

Change through fusion of elements posits the existence of two distinct kinds of multiplicity. The one formed by duration encompasses an indistinct and qualitative heterogeneity; the other displays a distinct and juxtaposing multiplicity characteristic of spatial representation. However, our tendency to define existence by what is distinctly given turns the notion of confused multiplicity or multiplicity without quantity into a contradictory idea. Multiplicity means plurality and common logic says that there is no plurality without distinction. Yet multiplicity without distinction is what we experience every time we listen to a melody, which is a plurality of notes forming a single, indivisible whole. Likewise, is not the way we relate to our person similar to the way we experience a melody? After all, as we noted earlier, the self is not given as a succession of juxtaposed states, but forms an indivisible continuity of interpenetrating plurality.

Since the experience of indistinct multiplicity is undeniable, the next step is to determine its mode of existence. Philosophy has already familiarized us with the distinction between the potential and the actual to denote an existence that is not yet explicit. However, the potential or the possible is not real whereas multiplicity is real in the case of duration, but without being actual or distinct. The source of the difficulty originates from our conception of the one and the multiple as antithetical notions. What is one excludes multiplicity and vice versa so that the one cannot integrate a real though indistinct multiplicity. To the extent that it cannot be real, a multiplicity that is indistinct is by definition purely potential or possible. According to Gilles Deleuze, Bergson precisely uses the term “virtual” to designate the mode of existence of “a nonnumerical multiplicity by which duration or subjectivity is defined.”¹⁵ In differentiating temporal or indistinct multiplicity from the spatial one, the virtual avoids the reduction of all existence to the spatial mode, and so overcomes the contradiction between the one and the multiple.

Simplicity is the other attribute of the mode of existence of duration. How else could a unity that contains an indistinct multiplicity be defined but by simplicity? For Bergson, Arnaud François says, “the simple is not only the multiple but the confused multiple ... the multiple that emerges

by way of actualization from a primary unity, and where the inverse operation is not possible.”¹⁶ Since there are no distinct parts, what is effectively actualized results from an act of creation, which is quite different from the act of materializing, of bringing into existence a preformed or potential notion. The inverse operation of going from the actual to the primary unity is not possible for the obvious reason that the original unity is not composed of distinct parts. The belief that one can constitute the original unity by putting distinct parts together is a retrograde logic that overlooks that the parts were not originally available as parts. On the contrary, they became possible after being created so that the prefiguration of the possible is just an illusion generated by “the mirage of the present in the past.”¹⁷

To illustrate the durational mode of existence, Bergson takes the example of white light, which gathers a diversity of multicolored rays in its indivisible unity. The unity in this case is not an abstract notion standing for what all colors have in common, a notion obtained by stripping each color of what makes it red, blue, yellow, etc. A general idea obtained by abstraction leaves out differences, thereby soaring above the concreteness of the real world. This detachment from reality generates the debate between nominalism and conceptualism: the former argues that the unity provided by the abstract notion simply signifies the extension of the same word to different things, while the latter objects that the extension is based on resemblance emanating from a potentially contained multiplicity. Be it by extension or intension, the oneness arising from abstraction overhangs the multiple but does not integrate it. To integrate in such a way that the one becomes a concrete multiplicity and not an abstract unity, one must proceed as in the case of convergent lens blending colors into a single ray of a pure white light. The operation “gives us different colors no longer subsumed under a concept but rather as nuances or degrees of the concept itself conceived as an intensive, undivided unity.”¹⁸ In other words, thinking in duration is to think the concrete as the intensive unity of an indistinct multiplicity.

CONTINUITY VERSUS DISCONTINUITY

Before we go further, let us briefly address some of the objections raised against the theory of time as duration for the benefit of clarification. For most critics, what else does the definition by the prolongation of the past into the present, by a continuity that is indivisible suggest but

that duration is immune to the temporal distinctions of before and after? As one author notes, “duration is all of one piece, an unbroken progress in which the whole of the past is accumulated and preserved and borne along with the present moment.”¹⁹ Instead of the usual temporal distinctions of past, present, and future, what we have is an enduring, changing now or, to use Bergson’s expression, “a perpetual present,” where perpetuity does not signify immobility, but “a present which endures.”²⁰ It follows that temporal distinctions emerge from our representation of time, which focuses on the practical needs of the living body and as a result of which the now signifies what is within reach. The real must not be identified with the actual because the actual is just a cut from the real following the lines of our interests. So that, to pass is not to vanish but to be removed from the realm of our interests. Here the notion of the virtual comes in handy by reminding us that something can be real without being actual. If the actual is only the active that is obtained by a cut, then what does not appear cannot be presumed non-existent. It exists as inactive or indistinct, that is, as virtual.

Insofar as critics do not pay attention to the Bergsonian distinction between the ontological and epistemological meanings of time, they use the three-dimensional time of representation to criticize the notion of duration. For instance, Donna Jones sees in the notion of interpenetrating continuity nothing but a religious longing designed to justify the belief in immortality through the theory of the independence of memory. Agreeing with Max Horkheimer, she maintains that the notion of a non-passing time simply indicates how “Bergson has ... abstracted from ‘real time’ and negated it.”²¹ We find a similar criticism in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who writes: “Bergson was wrong in explaining the unity of time in terms of its continuity, since that amounts to confusing past, present and future.”²² For one thing, Jones’s criticism does not seem pertinent in view of the fact that the idea of passing time has not dissuaded humans from believing in immortality. For another, nothing is more discordant than her expression “Eleatic Bergson,” given the reputation of Bergson as the philosopher of the flux to the point that some commentators associated him with Heraclitus. Be that as it may, those who, like Jones and Merleau-Ponty, criticize duration always forget that the notion of passing time is far from being a rationally acceptable conception, as evidenced by the controversies it generated in the past and continues to generate. To criticize a proposal designed to resolve the conflict by appealing to an idea that is highly controversial is hardly logical.

By contrast, what would have been logical is to examine to what extent the new proposal consistently achieves its goal of overcoming the controversies.

Other critics have contested the idea of continuity by arguing for the opposite idea of time as discontinuity. They say that the passing of time indicates that time is not so much a flow as an uninterrupted chain of discontinuities. A famous representative of this criticism is Gaston Bachelard who, in addition to labeling the criticism that “the words before and after have only a reference meaning” in the Bergsonian context, brandishes the argument that Bergson’s defense of the primacy of continuity entails the dismissal of the instant, which dismissal impedes the possibility of novelty.²³ Indeed, what is new necessitates a rupture of continuity and rupture cannot be real unless the instant that breaks with the past is real. Bergson’s explanation according to which novelty results from the prolongation of the past into the present simply overlooks that the new is new by breaking with the past, and not by continuing the past. In other words, as reiterated by Bergson himself, if novelty is essential to becoming, one must admit the discontinuous nature of time. In privileging continuity over discontinuity, Bergson does nothing less than deprive time of creativity. Accordingly, we should not talk of the instant as an artificial cut; rather, continuity is what we construct to provide passing instants “a frame sufficiently regular to give at the same time the impression of a continuity of being and of the rapidity of becoming.”²⁴ Clearly, Bachelard reverses the Bergsonian argument: the real—that which is not constructed—is not continuity but discontinuity.

Bachelard’s own reservations about the accuracy of his criticisms of Bergson diminish the need to refute them. As one author puts it, he decided “to nuance, attenuate, even abolish them when he realized that they only apply to the caricature of Bergsonism, as he recognizes it in *The Poetics of Space*.”²⁵ Even so, the main question that needs to be resolved remains: Why is Bergsonian continuity so prone to generate misunderstandings? It seems to me that the reason is not hard to find: because we normally associate the term “continuity” with perpetuation or preservation, we do not pay attention to the alteration that the term undergoes in Bergson’s thinking. Bergson does not speak of continuity per se, but of the continuity of change. What is continuous is change, and not what escapes change. Bergson does not need discontinuity to trigger change, given that change itself is persistent. However, to the extent that action requires that I isolate moments, I reconstruct the

continuity of change by means of discontinuous moments, even though I face the perplexing question of knowing how immobilities can make up change. To grant a role to discontinuity in terms of representation does not mean that it is the reason why there is change.

To say that change is continuous, persistent has a crucial implication: it alters the very understanding of change in that it defines change as differentiation, and not as discontinuity. According to the prevailing approach, the negation of the past is the *sine qua none* for change. The new is new insofar as it breaks with the past and with what already exists. This appeal to negation reiterates the confusion between the intellectual understanding of change and how change really occurs. If I want to isolate what is new and represents its novelty, I have to oppose it to the past, but this does not mean that it came into being by a process of negation. Duration precisely offers an approach that does not need to appeal to negation. In effecting change through the prolongation of the past into the present, and not its negation, duration achieves differentiation. The discrepancy between differentiation and discontinuity is clear enough. The former is an alteration of the same and, as such, implicates continuity in the precise sense of continuity of change; the latter has to deny the past, but for this very reason has trouble in assigning a direction to change unless it resorts to the Hegelian notion of dialectical synthesis.

Without denying the impressive nature of Hegel's undertaking, one must admit that his attempt to reconcile continuity and negation succeeds only insofar as change is conceived as development, that is, as the realization of what is implicitly given. As pointed out previously, for Hegel, development is rational because it is a movement "by which that only is explicit which is already implicitly present."²⁶ In such movement, the beginning and the end coincide, since the end is the beginning as it has developed. This circle of development excludes creativity in the radical sense of novelty and unpredictability, and so does not accommodate the idea of an open and undetermined evolutionary process. The undeniable force of the Hegelian conception is that it sees movement as an internally induced process thanks to the role of negativity which, unlike the mechanical concept of movement, does not require an external agent. Polarization or the splitting into contradictory and struggling poles is how a thing moves and develops itself, that is, actualizes its inner potency. Therefore, development is "self-development," a notion that would reveal a surprising rapprochement between Hegelianism and Bergsonism, were it not for the major difference that in Hegel

self-development reasserts the beginning, even if it is in a developed form, whereas with Bergson the process is one of differentiation.²⁷ With differentiation, the end and the beginning do not coincide. Not only is there no end, but the two cannot be matched for the main reason that in between real creation takes place.

The problem of time as discontinuity is that the severing of the connection with the past makes novelty into a fortuitous appearance. By contrast, differentiation maintains a link with the past since change is giving birth rather than a break in continuity. But is there no way by which one can reconcile the idea of change as negation or discontinuity with the idea of change as differentiation? The reconciliation would retain the character of novelty as rupture and the link with the past without, however, prolonging the past into the present? The prolongation changes time into a flow, with the consequence that it prevents discontinuity and hence the notion of novelty as rupture. It seems to me that Friedrich Nietzsche follows this path of thinking with his vision of time as eternal recurrence of the same. The vision allows the autonomy of the present because the past, instead of merging with the present, as is the case with Bergson, repeats, thereby denying itself the novelty it needs to become present.

To elaborate further, eternal recurrence does not mean that past things and events return to existence; it means exactly the opposite, namely, that what comes into existence is the new because the past forsakes continuation by returning, by repeating itself. With Bergson, the past is because it lives off the present by fusing with it; in the case of Nietzsche, recurrence cuts off the past from the present, disqualifies it forever from coming back or from contaminating the novelty of the present. In this way, eternal recurrence is selective: only the new is entitled to be present. However, because the past returns, what comes into existence is its variation, the new of the old. It returns but it is different, like the constant ebb and flow of the tide brings ever renewed water. Continuity conceived as "recurrence, with an ebb and a flood of its forms" gives us a world that can be defined as "the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying" world.²⁸ Recurrence reconciles continuity and discontinuity because it explains how the world is reborn from its ashes. By inserting discontinuity within continuity, recurrence removes the need to negate continuity. The new does not originate from an act of negation, but from the impossibility of continuity; more exactly, the new originates from the fact that rebirth is the

form of continuity. If rebirth or recurrence is how time continues, then novelty is its mode of existence or the manifestation of its intrinsic finiteness. What makes the finiteness of the world is not that it exists for a limited time, but that every moment is a rebirth from its death. Descartes's doctrine of continuous creation on the grounds that one moment of time does not imply the next moment is correct provided the theory of eternal recurrence replaces the role attributed to God. The truth is that a moment of time exists as recurrence, that is, its death is its existence as a new moment.

Nietzsche's theory that continuity is actually rebirth so that it includes discontinuity perfectly accounts for the novelty of the present. But does it really explain change in the sense of growth, progress, that is, in the sense of qualitative, evolutionary growth? The inclusion of discontinuity into continuity explains change but does not provide it with a direction. Yet, the world does not only change, but it also changes in the direction of greater complexity and functionality, a tendency that Hegel attempted to elucidate by conceiving of change as development. A word of caution: the issue of evolution is raised in connection with differentiation, and not to suggest that Bergson endorses the idea of a cumulative, unavoidable, and positively fated linear process of evolution. In defining evolution as creative, Bergson turns his back on all the features of a linear notion of evolution. However, because evolution is not linear, it does not mean that it is devoid of direction that can be defined as ascending. Precisely, Nietzschean recurrence renews the world at each moment but cannot provide it with an ascending tendency. Eternal recurrence exhibits neither purpose nor necessity; it is just "the great dice game of existence."²⁹ Having neither any goal nor any constraint except its finiteness, what it achieves is not ascension, but the eternal game of creating and destroying.

Duration understood as the prolongation of the past into the present is just this attempt to think a forward, ascending movement without appealing to necessity or teleology. While for Nietzsche the absence of goal and necessity reveals "the innocence of becoming," for Bergson it denotes the presence of a stubborn, enduring effort.³⁰ If anything, the continuity of duration means perseverance, which is the characteristic of something that is neither determined nor planned, something that is precisely striving. Nietzsche's vision creates out of destruction and vice versa; that of Bergson grasps creation as effort, that is, as the being-made. To say that things change does not mean that they pass; rather,

they seem to pass because they change or, which is the same thing, their passing is change in the making. Duration, says Bergson, “goes on increasing—rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow.”³¹

The reference to perseverance and effort strongly suggests that duration is an act. The suggestion definitively moves us away from the prevailing views of time as either an objectively given milieu or as a subjective form, in the manner of Kant. Granted that an activity is neither a thing nor a form, still there remains the need to attach duration to a being of which it is the active expression. This question of the ontological status of time is the other issue that fostered severe criticisms against Bergsonism, this time coming from the influential school of phenomenology.

DURATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

For phenomenologist thinkers, Bergsonian duration is a good example of how thinking is bound to stray each time it overlooks intentionality. In effect, they break with Bergsonism “precisely on the question of time, replacing a flowing time in consciousness with a consciousness that constitutes time.”³² For phenomenologists, in immersing consciousness into a substantial time, Bergson ignores the Kantian revolution making time into a form of perception, and so draws philosophy back to a precritical mode of thinking, instead of taking the idea of time as an imposed subjective form to its proper conclusion, namely, intentionality. Against the realism of duration, Merleau-Ponty opposes the idea of the “ideal nature of time” to firmly establish that, far from being immersed in time, “consciousness deploys or constitutes time.”³³ Indeed, if time is in consciousness instead of being deployed by it, it blocks the very possibility of a consciousness of time. Only when time becomes the very act of distancing from any content can there be a consciousness of time. Past, present, and future are precisely different intentional ways for consciousness to be in the mode of consciousness of something. Thanks to these temporal instances, consciousness never identifies with a content: whatever the latter is, it is given as no longer, not yet, and slipping instant. Temporal distancing, by which alone the act of being consciousness of something materializes, indicates, as Jean-Paul Sartre says, “the mode of being of a being which is itself outside itself.”³⁴ Let alone carrying consciousness, time is what enables consciousness to distance itself from itself and the surrounding world. Some such approach goes beyond the Kantian

subjectification, since time is no more a form of an already existing consciousness, but the very act by which consciousness is possible.

It is never overstated that when phenomenologists criticize Bergson they always overlook that his theory offers a legitimate place for their understanding of time. As previously mentioned, Bergsonism simply adds that, besides subjective time, there is an objective time called duration by which things change and new things happen. The subjective or the spatialized time has to do with action and can perfectly be understood in terms of intentionality. Indeed, through succession and a fleeting present, it generates distancing, thereby setting off remembering and protention. The combination of retention and protention makes recognition and prediction possible to the great benefit of action. However, these psychological operations presuppose and belong to an actually existing being and duration provides this being. In other words, consciousness cannot be reduced to the act of being consciousness of objects because the act refers to “a reality anterior to glancing and appearing.”³⁵ The whole question is to know how consciousness can operate as consciousness without distancing, without being consciousness of something.

The nature of duration resolves the dilemma of being consciousness of something while at the same time being a content, an ontological reality. What we have said so far about duration is that it is full and does not allow distinction, two features that exclude spatialization. A fusion such that elements lose their distinct nature exists only in an intensive mode, as opposed to the extensive mode which, by contrast, denotes a loss of tension as a result of which it spreads out. That which rolls up can hold everything together without spreading only to the extent that it is one and multiple at the same time or indistinctly. We recognize this mode of existence to be that of the idea or concept or, more concretely, that of the self. A unity that holds an indistinct, indivisible multiplicity is by definition tension, which is generative of sensation for the reason that it initiates an act that feels itself. In what is mechanical or automatic, unconsciousness prevails because what is simply unfolding does not act. By contrast, tension nurtures effort and is on the way to willing.

To have some vision of the process involved, we can think of a continuity that merges its multiplicity so tightly as to become a mathematical point. This holding cannot be a thing as it requires a constant activity, just as it cannot result in anything countable. Accordingly, not only is it an act, but also it donates itself as a qualitative existence, as an immanent

consciousness in which subject and object coincide. The other term for this self-felt activity is intuition, which is an appearing immanent to what is appearing. This is to say that the problem with phenomenology is that it identifies consciousness with the act of being consciousness of objects and that the identification inserts an insurmountable ontological barrier between consciousness and unconsciousness, in agreement with classical dualism. For Bergson, the only way to overcome the contradictions of dualism is to allow the possibility of a gradual transition from unconsciousness to consciousness, precisely by avoiding the reduction of consciousness to pure subjectivity. If the reduction is pursued consistently, it leads nowhere but to the Sartrean opposition between being and nothingness, the latter standing for that which detaches because it is devoid of content. The opposition disappears and with it the difficulties of dualism if, instead of restricting consciousness to the ideal act of detachment, we say that it is a form of being whose manifestation requires conditions countering automatism and determinism. So conceived, the material world is no longer the opposite of consciousness but “an obscured consciousness and a dormant will” that rekindle where determinism is suspended.³⁶

To say that the melting of multiplicity into an indivisible whole yields “an immanent seeing,” to quote Frédéric Worms, is to affirm the logical primacy of the immanent mode of consciousness to the form of consciousness as consciousness of something and to set the condition by which the latter derives from the former.³⁷ The consciousness of detachment, of separation between subject and object obviously arises from the need to act, that is, from the fact of a union with a living body surrounded by external objects on which depends its integrity. While the form of coinciding or immanent consciousness is primary, life turns the internal mirror into a lighthouse detecting the effects of surrounding things, thereby adding the form of consciousness of objects. Distancing is necessary for practical life means that the externalizing look is just one, though crucially important, mode of being conscious. It follows that the misunderstanding with Bergsonism stems from the refusal of phenomenology to admit two different modes of being: the spatial or the mode of distinct multiplicity and the durational or the mode of indistinct multiplicity. When referring to Bergson’s critique of associationism, Sartre accuses him of leaving “inert images at the heart of pure duration, like tiles at the bottom of a pool” on the grounds that the Bergsonian memory conserves images.³⁸ What else does the accusation express but

Sartre's belief that the so-called interpenetrating multiplicity is nothing but an aggregate of distinct elements? Because in conscious representation distinct elements appear, it does not mean that they are conserved in their distinct states. On the contrary, the fact that they appear distinctly should tell us that they presuppose an act of incision by which from virtual they become actual.

DURATION AS THE STUFF OF REALITY

We have already established that continuity and change are not only prominent attributes of duration, but that they also are reciprocal notions. Without continuity, change becomes a succession of immobilities; without change, continuity amounts to fixity. It is because philosophy missed the mutual implication of these notions that it got bogged down in the controversy over the issue of substance. Roughly, the latter is the necessary support for inhering attributes, like extension, movement, and thinking, which obviously are properties and, as such, belong to a thing or an entity. Not only does the distinction between attributes and substance make the latter undefinable, but also its severance from the attributes of movement and change turns it into a static, fixed support.

Bergson diagnoses the need for such a static notion as an unavoidable consequence of the misconception of time. Once the notion of change is equated with a succession of juxtaposed and fixed moments, one must posit an underlying fixed support to hold together the changes and attribute them to a definite object. Alluding to the conception of the self as a substance, Bergson says, "states which have become distinct like the beads of a necklace ... require, in order to hold them together, a thread which is neither this nor that, nothing that resembles beads, nothing that resembles anything whatsoever,—an empty entity, a simple word."³⁹ In uncovering the emptiness of the notion of substance, Bergson points to its fictional character. Since nothing in reality suggests the presence of a static entity, the idea of a fixed support is just an artificial means to get out of theoretical quandaries generated by the division of time into distinct and juxtaposed moments.

The great merit of the durational conception of time is that, in addition to making the notion of a fixed substratum unnecessary, it frees us from the obligation of considering change and permanence as opposites. As we saw, the merger of moments enables us to think permanence

no more as immobility, but as continuity of change. The substance is permanent, not because it is static, but because it endures, that is, blends moments into one another. If changes are not juxtaposed, they make up continuity and the contradiction between change and permanence disappears because, so conceived, change yields the permanence of continuity. In asserting that “the permanence of substance” is but “a continuity of change,” Bergson does no more than propose duration as a substitute for the old notion of substratum, with the major difference that permanence signifies continuity of change instead of being the unchanging.⁴⁰

As “the very substance of the world in which we live,” duration is no longer an attribute or a predicate.⁴¹ Instead, both spirituality and materiality are attributes, different forms of duration. The reformulation of the notion of substance establishes that things do not first exist and then become this or that; they exist as movements, becoming is their being. In other words, “becoming is itself no longer a predicate but a subject in its own right.”⁴² As specified already, immobilization is how we locate a change and make it a possible object of our action. We do this precisely by conceiving movement as an attribute of a definite object. To think movement as subject requires that we dissolve the fixity of the object into the fluidity of the indivisible whole. So conceived, the whole is none other than immanent duration, which manifests itself as consciousness or materiality, depending on its inner tension.

Bergson’s statement that “the universe endures” eliminates the fixity and separate existence of distinct material objects in the same way as it removes the notion of distinct states from consciousness.⁴³ As concerns materiality, the substantial nature of duration means objects that we perceive and conceive as distinct and fixed stick out from an underlying continuity made of innumerable and interacting vibrating movements. Viewed from the unifying perspective of duration, the nature of matter corresponds to the intuitive vision described in Chapter 2 as an unceasing continuity of countless vibrations. To think movement as subject, and not as predicate, is therefore to understand that whatever protrudes is an artificial cut of an indivisible and interpenetrating continuity, be it material or spiritual, even if it is true that material continuity tends to spread out its contents while that of spirit follows the direction of intension.

This distinction between consciousness and materiality must not be interpreted as a dualist position; it simply means that, although all existing things endure, they do not endure in the same way.

As mentioned during the confrontation between Bergsonism and phenomenology, for the past to merge into the present without distinction and divisibility, the modality of tension must come into play. What is distinct and separate cannot merge into an indistinct multiplicity unless it transitions to a tenser unity. The tension that fuses multiplicity yields a qualitative mode of existence, which is then an immanent consciousness. How else would a non-spatial content exist but as quality or as what is sensed? "There was an odor, that is, it was smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a color or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch," says George Berkeley to remind us that a quality exists only to the extent that it is sensed.⁴⁴ In what is tense or condensed, all the elements enter into each other to the point of canceling all juxtaposition, thereby becoming virtual or ideal. Condensation does not cancel the reality of the elements; nor does it leave out their individuality to only retain the abstract notion. An existence that is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract," to quote Deleuze, is none other than a qualitative mode of existence, that is, the one that is multiple at the same time.⁴⁵ This is exactly how the unity of the self, for instance, is subjectively lived as "character," as "the actual synthesis of all our past states."⁴⁶ Such a synthesis is neither empirically given nor an abstract notion; it is concrete without any distinction, a condensed view of the entire history of the person releasing the sense of a unique individuality.

What condensation realizes contains an indication of the mode of existence that results from the reverse process of distension. Relaxation or the loss of tension goes in the direction of extensity and distinction, thereby generating an increasingly loose unity in which distinct elements appear. Evidently, a decreasing tension tends to dilute quality in favor of quantity, just as it inherently deploys necessity since the loss of tension cannot generate anything other than an unfolding, automatic movement. These features are the very ones that induce the unconsciousness of materiality. The decrease of tension inhibits the prolongation of the past into the present, leading at the limit to a present that repeats itself, that appears and disappears, unable as it is to merge into the next moment. Because the lack of the fusion of moments decreases intensity, it triggers an extending and automatic movement, like a released spring. In this movement of distension, the continuity of the whole becomes repetitive in default of being cumulative. This instantaneous, appearing and disappearing existence is unconsciousness. For instance, the difference between the sound that I hear and the corresponding objectively

given repetitive and innumerable vibrations is that the condensation of the vibrations gives sound because my duration merges instantaneous vibrations into a quality, that is, into a sensation.

Posed in terms of duration, the distinction between matter and consciousness moves from being substantial to a difference in intensity. The reduction of the distinction to intensity allows “a reconciliation between the unextended and the extended, between quality and quantity.”⁴⁷ We pass from subject to object via distension and from object to subject via condensation. Thus, the perception of colors results from the contraction of innumerable vibrations in one of our moments. Now suppose that we effect the reverse process of stretching out our duration: “should we not, as the rhythm slowed down, see these colors pale and lengthen into successive impressions, still colored, no doubt, but nearer and nearer to coincidence with pure vibrations?”⁴⁸ The process of the colors becoming pale and extended is also the process by which they increasingly lose their qualitative nature and descend into an unconscious state.

DURATION AS EFFORT

Terms like tension and détente denote the presence of effort or the lack thereof. Moreover, our analysis has already unveiled in duration an act that resonates with the sense of effort. Indeed, the continuity of duration suggests an act that endures, perseveres, that is, therefore, in the making. What blends together moments by countering the tendency to spread out, how else could it be defined but as effort? The radical difference between duration and space is thus perfectly expressible in terms of effort. To prolong moments of time into one another instead of lining them up requires effort, that is, the very act of holding in the present a condensed mode of existence. Something endures to the extent it does not fall into scattered pieces that simply line up. By contrast, that which appears and disappears is constantly undoing itself, incapable as it is of gathering itself, so to speak. What lines up denotes a depressed duration, a duration not intense enough to merge its moments. This is exactly how a watch counts time: unable to blend moments, it spreads them out as distinct spatial points.

So long as philosophers remain focused on the passing aspect of time, they miss the endurance and hence the striving inherent in time, the consequence of which is that they do not know what to do with time. This incomprehension leads them to give primacy to eternity through

the belief that everything is already given. Whether they supported determinism or the idea of a planned creation, in both cases time simply exhibited successively what is already given so that it “served no purpose, did nothing.”⁴⁹ For time to be and do something, not only must we accept the idea of an unfinished and undetermined world, but we must also discard the notion of time as a mere passive medium of sequential appearance. In other words, we must accept time as endurance, as effort. Obviously, what is eternal, already given, or automatic does not require any effort to be. However, effort is needed to make exist what did not exist previously, potentially, or otherwise. If there is one thing that is unthinkable outside time, that thing is precisely effort. The association of time with effort brings out the difference between duration and spatialized time: instantaneity as well as passing time prevent effort by their undoing character. Not so when time is conceived as duration. The merger of moments releases a cumulative process that can only be thought of as effort. This shows that the expression “effort takes time” is somewhat misleading in that it views time as a passive milieu and so overlooks that the nature of time as duration, as merger of its moments is what is generative of effort. In short, duration is in itself effort.

Time does not simply roll out an already given content means that the content has to be invented or created. Inversely, what needs to be invented to come into existence requires effort. Since to think time as duration is to read into the passage of things actual creation, the thinking posits an underlying and uninterrupted effort within reality. Where there is duration or effort, not only nothing is the same as before, since to conserve is essentially to change, but more importantly, change through the fusion of moments of time is actually self-creation. Indeed, a change resulting from an internal process of fusion cannot be attributed to an external agent or be categorized as an effect. Since, in opposition to change induced by an external agent, change resulting from an internal merging effort activates a process of immanent growth or maturation, it is exactly self-creation: “to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.”⁵⁰ When one exchanges the spatial representation of change for that of duration, change ceases to be effect because it involves effort whose distinct virtue is to obtain more from less. With effort, change is not what happens to things; it is rather what things concoct, thereby altering themselves.

The sense of self-effort implied in duration gives a direction to change that is neither planned nor determined. If both planning and

determinism are out of the picture, what else remains but self-creation? True, it may be argued here that the appeal to self-creation is not warranted, that the notion of chance has more credibility than creation to explain the existence of something that did not exist previously in any shape or form. The problem with chance, however, is that novelty, in addition to being a differentiation born out of the old, is often an advancement. The undeniable continuity between the old and the new as well as the achieved progress can hardly be explained by chance. Instead, they seem to require the presence of a creative effort.

On the other hand, what is unlimited or infinite does not need effort, just as what becomes less does not require effort but detente. Accordingly, effort goes hand in hand with limitation, with the idea that only that which has limitations is in need and is capable of effort. And as the effort in question involves self-effort, the process is one of self-overcoming, of going beyond one's limits. In other words, the universe endures means that reality is animated by an immanent endeavor to surpass itself. Using a familiar image, it "resembles a gradually expanding rubber balloon assuming at each moment unexpected forms," says Bergson.⁵¹ Just as the expanding balloon pushes back the limit of its volume, similarly whatever is exists to the extent that it endeavors to outdo itself.

The image of duration as an expanding balloon suggests another important specification about effort and self-creation. Just as the balloon increases its volume by its own inner expansion, and not for the purpose of filling a preexisting internal empty space, so too duration creates, surpasses its limits by its own inner growth. This is to say that creation is not triggered by lack or emptiness; rather, it is the product of that which is full and compact. The truth is that only that which is full can overcome itself instead of struggling to fill its deficiencies. That which is deficient does not create; what creates is that which is capable of surpassing itself, of being at variance with the limits constituting its sufficiency. Consequently, self-overcoming is impelled neither by lack nor by the attraction of preexisting goals, just as it is not caused by external forces. It is an inner expansion creating means and goals as it advances.

What is said here squarely agrees with the famous Bergsonian criticisms of nothingness and negative ideas. The criticisms are the logical prolongation of the continuity of duration, given that continuity by means of the merger of moments excludes void and posits an omnipresent fullness. If duration fuses moments instead of juxtaposing them, it is because it is stranger to the empty space necessary to line them up.

Similarly, where there is fullness, movement and change can only be an internal metamorphosis or self-change. Owing to the absence of separation or distinction, nothing is distinctly cause or distinctly effect in duration. To include distinction and juxtapose objects, one must isolate moments by inserting holes into the compact and interacting reality. As a Bergsonian scholar notes, to isolate is to “create a void around some aspects of the real based on the needs of our action.”⁵² What is isolated protrudes because it is no longer immersed into the surrounding compact reality and detaches itself against a background riddled with holes. The trick, if one may use this word, is that absence or nothingness creates a fragmented vision without actually fragmented reality so that the underlying reality is that of duration, which is fullness, continuity, unity, and in which nothing stands out but everything interacts or interpenetrates.

From the ability to divide reality and cut out distinct things afforded by the representation of nothingness follows the conclusion that both nothingness and negative ideas have no ontological standing, their purpose being essentially practical. To say that the table is not white or that my pocket is empty does not state anything objectively given, something like an objective non-reality. To quote Bergson, “it is in vain, then, that we attribute to negation the power of creating ideas *sui generis*, symmetrical with those that affirmation creates, and directed in a contrary sense.”⁵³ On the other hand, the idea of nothingness and the use of negation make perfectly sense when we posit the presence of a mind that refuses, regrets, expects, or projects, that is, a mind concerned not so much with speculation as with a practical engagement with the world. Accordingly, Bergson criticizes the idea of nothingness and negative assertions when they are provided with ontological meanings, not when they signify the conditions of action. The ontological level belongs to duration, which by essence has no tolerance for nothingness and negative ideas. The features of duration, namely, continuity, interpenetration, unity, abhor what action requires, namely, discontinuity, emptiness, pre-existence, lack, etc. They set off a creative process that endlessly pushes the limits of its fullness through a power of inner expansion.

Where there is an inner tendency of expansion, change ceases to be an occurrence or the realization of a preexisting goal to become self-overcoming. The notion of immanent effort thus removes the need for teleological explanation by showing that the issue is not about the progressive, dialectical or not, realization of a preexisting goal.

Rather, means and goals originate from effort and are all creations in the radical sense of the word. Nor does their novelty consist in their finiteness, in the fact that, unable to continue, they constantly return as new, as Nietzsche believed. As we saw, Nietzsche speaks of existence as a game of dice because the world is devoid both of design and continuity. Just as the same dice thrown repeatedly reappear with new numbers, so too reality repeats and renews each moment.⁵⁴ Though Bergson rejects the appeal to teleology, he does not think that the Nietzschean type of solution is the only alternative left. For him, things owe their novelty to duration, to the effort to continue by pushing limits. They are new to the extent that their effort succeeds, and not because their death is how they return as renovated. As expressive of an inner effort, reality discloses a direction of upward movement, and not a movement that has to return in an altered form because it exhausts itself at each moment. In addition to allowing Bergson to postulate an upward tendency that is neither planned nor determined, the notion of duration inserts the features of an unplanned and contingent process into the upward tendency, without appealing to a combination of chance and necessity, in the manner of Nietzsche. In referring to a creative striving, Bergson keeps the sense of contingency while posing at the same time an upward tendency. Effort achieves more from less and this more is invention.

The important implication following from the diffused presence of effort is that consciousness itself is effort, although operating at a much greater scale of intensification than organic and inorganic matter. The implication takes us back to the conflict between Bergsonism and phenomenology. As already stated, the crucial difference between the two is that for phenomenology representation, the act of being consciousness of something defines consciousness, while for Bergson duration, understood as effort, and not as the passing time, constitutes consciousness. As François points out, for Bergson, the nature of consciousness “is volitional and not representative.”⁵⁵ The correctness of François’s interpretation is confirmed by Bergson himself. In a lecture he gave at the Colombia University in 1913, he said: “We can’t make will out of thought; we can, by effort of will, think. Volition, not thought, is the basis of conscious life, we should start from the fact of will, not, as so many thinkers have done in the past, from the fact of thought.”⁵⁶ Undoubtedly, the prevailing approach defines consciousness by knowledge rather than by volition, the understanding being that volition derives from thinking. Yet, to think is not to will, as amply demonstrated by our incapacity to act every time

our will fails us even though we retain the representation of the action. By contrast, if we have the drive, the thoughts necessary to fulfill it will not be long in coming. Volition cannot be deduced from representation and thinking itself is an act of will insofar as it requires concentration. The complete lack of will would induce indifference to the point of turning off representation. Is not indifference the very condition that removes representation from materiality? The primacy of will derives from one undeniable fact: that which is condensed becomes and remains condensed by a constant effort and, as such, grasps itself as volition. Its reason for representation and thinking springs from this inner drive.

BEYOND FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

The primacy of will naturally involves us in the perennial debate opposing defenders of free will and determinists. It goes without saying that what has been said so far about duration strongly supports the idea of human freedom. The question is to know how duration qualifies freedom and how the qualification differs from existing theories and, more importantly, overcomes the theoretical contradictions feeding on the debate over free will and determinism.

It is easy to show that duration provides a royal road to approaching the issue of freedom if we recall Bergson's question about the utility of time. The belief that everything is already given, determined, Bergson argues, entails that time is and means nothing. What this means is that, under pain of making no sense, the fact that I am a temporal being implies my freedom. If my life is already finished, already decided, its duration is an illusion because it accomplishes nothing. But is such an absence of accomplishment a fact of life? Unlike the spatialized time, in merging one moment into the next moment, duration launches a cumulative, creative process, that is, a process that cannot be assimilated to a merely unfolding movement. The process takes time because it is precisely a gestation, and not an unwinding. As we have attempted to establish, the gestation is not a mystery, since the merger of moments releases a tensional process, otherwise called effort, as a result of which more is produced from what is less. Some such result reveals that duration is a movement directed toward self-surpassing so that what is called freedom is none other than this "creation of self by self."⁵⁷

This identification of freedom with self-creation does not exactly square with the view of the defenders of free will. The prevailing

approach among them associates freedom with the ability to choose between alternative courses of action. Not only does this ability to choose presuppose the associationist composition of mental life with floating distinct states, but also the involvement of choice lays the ground for the arguments of determinism. To begin with, choice posits preexisting possibilities and turns freedom into an oscillation, usually called deliberation, between given possibilities. For Bergson, however, so defined, “the choice never really happens, because the alternatives are never really given as such in advance. They are fictions, invented after the fact, in order to tell a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end.”⁵⁸ In assuming that what is chosen had a prior existence as possible, the retrospective construction turns a blind eye to the necessity of creation. It thus misses the fact that an act has little chance of being free if it is not new and, hence, unpredictable. Moreover, once distinct and preexisting alternatives are admitted, one would have to provide the reason why one alternative was chosen. Unless choice is supported by some motive, would it not become arbitrary or irrational? The determinist then has the easy game of retorting that what is called “free” decision in a situation defined by competing alternative courses is “nothing more than the victory of the strongest over the weaker.”⁵⁹ Where there is conflict between distinct tendencies, the choice of the one can only be explained by its superior strength. The provision of an explanation based on the potency of distinct psychological states does no more than support the position of the determinist.

Does the severe shortcoming of the definition of freedom as a choice between preexisting alternatives entail the conclusion that choice should be altogether omitted from any discussion about freedom? One hesitates because of the persistent belief that freedom ceases to be freedom if it does not implicate in some way the ability to choose. Is it then not possible to involve choice without thereby acknowledging preexisting alternatives? Such seems to be the originality of Sartre’s theory of freedom. For him, the bare fact about human existence is that “what is impossible is not to choose” and this inevitability of choice ascertains that humans are makers of themselves.⁶⁰ Not only does Sartre move closer to Bergson by conceiving freedom in terms of creation, but also by specifically rejecting the preexistence of alternatives. In complete agreement with Bergson, he maintains that the alleged choice between given possibilities is just a retrospective view, an interpretation after the fact. In the famous example of the student who hesitates between going to war against Germany or

staying in France to take care of his needy mother, Sartre shows that the higher strength of the chosen course of action results from the choice, and not the other way round. Suppose that my assumption is that the student decided to stay because the love of his mother is the stronger motive. At the same time, I must admit that “the only way [the student] can measure the strength of this affection is precisely by performing an action that confirms and defines it.”⁶¹ In other words, it is the decision to stay that creates the greater value of the affection, which is then a consequence rather than a cause of the choice.

The eagerness to show the closeness of the two philosophers must not be allowed to conceal the vast difference separating them. For Sartre, the source of freedom is the negativity of consciousness, the fact that it transcends all determinations by detaching itself as consciousness of something. For Bergson, it is the opposite in that freedom is defined as coincidence with oneself; in his own words, “we are free when our acts spring from our whole personality, when they express it, when they have that indefinable resemblance to it which one sometimes finds between the artist and his work.”⁶² Rather than resulting from detachment, the free act springs from the effort we make to act in accordance with our true personality; it is measured by the degree of conformity with our deep self so that freedom is less about choice than about being the cause of our actions. That is why for Bergson freedom “admits of degrees,” whereas for Sartre it is absolute as it is derived from the transcendence of consciousness.⁶³ The fact that one can be more or less free portrays freedom as the very effort to coincide with the true self, as opposed to the superficial or social self. Contrary to Sartre, Bergson would insist that detachment forfeits an essential aspect of freedom, namely, that it is about being the true and only cause of our action. Freedom does not mean much if the act is not derived from our true self; worst yet, if consciousness itself has no content, as is the case with Sartre, being but consciousness of something. Only if “consciousness is something,” to quote Deleuze, does freedom make sense in the very sense of adhering or not to the somebody we are.⁶⁴

This reference to effort allows choice but only as a lower degree of freedom. The fact that I hesitate, namely, generate and consider alternatives, is part of the process of maturation and self-creation, a process that precisely takes duration. The error of the advocates of free will is that deliberation is for them not so much development as an oscillation suddenly interrupted by a diktat. For Bergson, freedom is not an act of commandment: it is a process of maturation made possible by duration, that

is, by the fact that all the elements composing our personality interact and produce a common result. As Bergson puts it, what we have is “a self which lives and develops by means of its very hesitations, until the free action drops from it like an over-ripe fruit.”⁶⁵ As lower levels of freedom, hesitation and deliberation progress toward their cessation by achieving coincidence and finally delivering the complete free act. Needless to say, freedom to the point of complete oneness with our deep self is rare; in most cases, it ends somewhere between hesitation and coincidence. Moreover, being a common result birthed by our entire personality, the free act is not exactly susceptible of a rational explanation. When we try to provide a reason for our decision, “we find that we have decided without any reason, and perhaps even against every reason.”⁶⁶ As a creation germinating from our entire character, the free act is not reducible to a particular cause, and so transcends any distinct reason that we may ascribe to it.

Some such theory of freedom, one may object, comes dangerously close to endorsing determinism. Worms expresses this concern when he asks, “In what way relating an act to the totality of a psychological life would amount to escaping determinism?”⁶⁷ The question is legitimate in view of the fact that freedom as coincidence, in addition to turning the free act into an emanation of a deep self that is not of our making, gives it the feature of necessity, specifically of an act that could not have been otherwise. In reality, these characteristics do not contradict freedom, provided they are given the correct interpretation. Precisely, the determinist forgets that the coincidence is the result of a sustained effort of the will; it is not an automatic occurrence pursuant to some overriding causal power. On the other hand, it is true that the complete free act yields the sense of necessity, which however expresses not so much the sense of being overpowered as of achieving a perfect adherence, very much like when we say of a masterpiece of art that there is nothing to add or alter. If the action emanates from our deep personality, it makes no sense to speak of determinism, given that there is no constraint or compulsion when we act in conformity with our personality. Constraint appears when our mental life is divided into distinct states and one state is supposed to prevail over all the others. This is exactly how both determinists and defenders of free will think: they fragment the self into separate states and set one aspect of the person against others aspects. This artificially generated opposition accounts both for the oscillation of free will and the coercion of the deniers of freedom.

In speaking of a false opposition, Bergson wants to show that freedom is actually a fact, an object of direct experience. In direct contrast with Kant, for instance, who approaches freedom as a postulate of practical reason, Bergson wants to establish that freedom is a fact of life, a lived experience, and not an object of belief. His objective is not so much to demonstrate the existence of freedom as to remove the dust that prevents us from seeing it. The dust is none other than the false problem generated by the misconception of duration, that is, the composition of the self with distinct and juxtaposed states, which composition explains, as we saw, the conflict between the determinists and their opponents. Bergson's assumption is that "the fact of freedom" will become obvious once "its problem disappears," precisely by being exposed as a false problem.⁶⁸ By contrast, Kant believes that freedom and determinism would cease to be "mutually repellent concepts" if freedom is placed beyond temporal determinations—which for him frame the exclusive domain of determinism—and ascribed to a being conceived as "*a thing in itself*."⁶⁹ Bergson retorts that determinism covers the whole of experience only if duration is confused with the spatialized time. The problem of freedom disappears when the authentic experience of duration is restored.

What about the objection according to which Bergson makes freedom dependent on the supposition of a deep primal self, which is, by definition, alien to the acting person? Does not the objection make the point that the ability to choose is essential to freedom, that without it freedom is blocked by a given and impassable identity? It would have been so if the essence of the Bergsonian freedom consisted in becoming who we are. As a philosopher of change, Bergson has no business with advocating a form of freedom that would simply echo what is already given. This does not mean that there is no some received material. Referring to our character, Bergson speaks of "prenatal dispositions" and of "the original bent of our soul."⁷⁰ Our freedom consists in using this given material to shape an original figure and thus create ourselves, in the same way the artist creates new forms by molding available materials. To quote Bergson, "artisans of our life, even artists when we so desire, we work continually, with the material furnished us by the past and present, by heredity and opportunity, to mold a figure unique, new, original, as unforeseeable as the form given by the sculptor to the clay."⁷¹ The constant alteration of the received material means that there is no given bent to which we can come back so that the process is one of unceasing self-transformation.

The direction of this process of self-transformation is equally obvious: if the motto is not to become who we are, it is because freedom is directed toward self-overcoming. The continuity of transformation has to do with outdoing oneself, with going beyond what is originally given and already achieved. What else could creation of self by self mean but the constant endeavor of the self to cross over its perceived or established boundaries? This is exactly in line with the nature of duration whose inner interaction and tension release effort and in doing so draw more from less. The mentioned coincidence is not identification with a static primal self, but a continuous recapitulation of what is already achieved in order to go further, to transcend the limit so far reached. This self-surpassing confirms that freedom is a direct derivation of duration, of the prolongation of the past into a condensed present and the subsequent generation of novelty. This means that freedom goes with a will that is strained to the maximum to gather all the past and insert it undivided into the present. This degree of self-possession is understandably rare; it shows that Bergson's assertion that freedom allows of various degrees is an essential component of his theory. The habit of posing the problem of freedom in terms of either/or excludes effort, and so presents freedom as something we have or do not have.

The importance of the notion of degrees of freedom is such that it perfectly accounts for the essential reason Bergson rejects both determinism and free will. It is because both theories ignore the inherent effort involved in the free act that they present the problem in terms of being absolutely determined or absolutely free. Even if free will implicates deliberation, it is in the form of oscillation between given alternatives: the deliberation picks one alternative, but does not work to produce the outcome. As to determinism, it excludes effort by definition, since the motive with the strongest causal power is the one that prevails and that the concerned person is powerless to prevent it. The notion of degrees of freedom is so central to Bergson that he does not hesitate to say that "the parasitic self" encroaches on the "fundamental self" and that "many live this kind of life, and die without having known true freedom."⁷² While for Sartre "man is condemned to be free," for Bergson, freedom is a conquest, an effort at which human beings can and do fail.⁷³ The failure to be free leads to a depersonalized life, mostly derived from the impersonal norms of social life whose function is to fashion a conventional, socially adapted self. It is equally a failure to be free if one simply succumbs to one's natural impulses. In both cases, life follows prescribed paths when

the whole issue of freedom is the deployment of the effort that takes us beyond them, that molds the given into a constantly evolving personality. Freedom is about creation in the very sense of overcoming oneself, of transgressing the limits imposed by society and our natural determinations. This endeavor obviously allows of degrees because freedom as self-effort is measured by how far the limits have been pushed.

We owe a detailed and remarkable study of the shared ideas running through Bergson, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer on the issue of freedom to François. These ideas originate from the common rejection of the theory of free will and from the position defining freedom as “conformity to oneself.”⁷⁴ To limit our analysis to Bergson and Nietzsche, both think that the contradiction between freedom and necessity vanishes only when freedom is problematized in terms of realizing oneself. Just as for Bergson freedom is a conquest to liberate creativity, similarly for Nietzsche it is liberation but of the will to power. My contention is that despite the many similarities the huge gap between the two resides in the objective of liberation, more exactly in what is liberated. Though very much like Bergson, Nietzsche states that “human being is something that must be overcome,” there is little agreement on the direction of the overcoming.⁷⁵ For Nietzsche, the process aims at liberating the will to power. It is about discarding all those ideas, beliefs, and values suppressing the will, like God, Christian morality, the belief in the soul, etc., so as to liberate the will again. In Nietzsche’s view, since metaphysical concepts and moral and religious ideas are invented “in order to despise the body, in order to make it sick,” the submission of life to ideal and restrictive norms is none other than “a stratagem to suck out the life itself.”⁷⁶ These norms have spiritualized the human to the point where the human has become unable of pure will, that is, of a will that wants to increase power. Such a will is fundamentally free because it does not pursue any other goal than the increase of its power. Nor is it determined by any force since it uses determination to increase its strength. A will that neither pursues a goal nor allows to be a mere effect is definitively in agreement with time conceived of as eternal recurrence of the same: what is constantly reborn instead of being continuous, that is, the discontinuity of time, liberates the will, turns each moment into a willed moment. Being neither teleological nor mechanical, recurrence targets nothing and does not act as a cause. It thus reinstitutes the innocence of becoming and, with it, the freedom to will in the very sense of the will becoming its own objective, willing nothing but its own aggrandizement.

As previously indicated, though duration is neither pursuing any specific goal nor is determined by any force, it has nevertheless an ascending or progressive direction. Unlike Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, which wants to liberate and expand the will to power, time understood as duration is oriented toward creativity in the very sense of liberating and continuing the creativity of life. The impulse to revive the creativity of life implies one basic truth, namely, that for Bergson the natural is an arrest, a stoppage obtained by dividing and often opposing the inherent tendencies of life. Accordingly, the liberation and continuation of the creative process of life means going beyond the limits of nature and reinstating the oneness of life. Creativity is not and cannot be the mere continuation of the natural for the main reason that nature does not provide norms, being but a halt, a standstill. The direction of creativity is toward the overcoming of the limitations and divisions of nature, which overcoming ultimately leads to mysticism—more will be said on this in the coming chapters—and not to the strengthening of the will to power. In contrast to Nietzsche's view of spiritualization as the path to decadence, to the weakening and domination of the natural, the spiritualization of the human through Christian beliefs and morality is for Bergson the correct and ascending direction to overcoming nature. While for the former, far from enhancing the will to power, the perverted domination stifles and demonizes the forces able to heighten the will, Bergson maintains that the notion of power presupposes a dislocated and divided nature and the will to more power does no more than aggravate the divisions. As a consequence of materialization, the quest for power does not indicate life's direction toward transcendence. What enhances life is oneness and the road to oneness passes through the overcoming of nature, which is exactly what spiritualization wants to achieve. In other words, the will becomes great, overcomes itself if, instead of wanting itself, it serves life's endeavor to break out of the limitations of nature. Duration provides the very basis of the overcoming by releasing tension through the blending of moments into a qualitatively differentiated unity that both unifies and transcends them.

The next chapter will focus on the limitation of nature through the study of the unity of life and matter. Life encountering its own reverse process and subsequently actualizes itself as self-effort generates fragmented and diverging forms of life. These forms constitute so many stoppages calling for a renewed effort to continue life's creative work by transcending the limits of nature.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 4

Life as the Inversion of Materiality

The previous chapter has revealed duration as the crucible of a self-striving ontology. The goal of this chapter is to analyze the concrete components that make up the self-striving tendency. There is self-effort if the same tendency is composed of two movements pulling in opposite directions so that the one movement tries to overcome the resistance of the other movement. For Bergson, these movements, usually termed life and materiality, represent different levels of duration, more exactly, signify the attempt to regain tension following an initial loss.

What complicates the study of Bergsonian ontology is that Bergson seems to provide a negative understanding of matter while criticizing nothingness and negative notions as empty concepts. The previous chapter alluded to the criticisms. It underlined the fullness of duration by arguing that the negativity generative of discontinuity has to do with practical interests rather than with speculation. To settle the issue of the negative status of matter, this chapter must draw further on the Bergsonian critique of negative concepts, with the view of showing whether critics are right when they speak of inconsistency. If, as stated by Bergson himself, negative concepts signify nothing real, then a definition of matter based on its negativity to life does raise the question of the consistency of Bergsonian ontology.

BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

As alluded in the Introduction, Parmenides denies movement and change based on the unthinkable nature of nothingness. Being is full: "it neither was nor will be, it simply is—now, altogether, one continuous," he says.¹ Bergson too rejects nothingness but through the affirmation of movement and change. As we saw, Being is full, not because it does not change, but because change is duration, that is, a continuously merging flow in which nothing is discontinuous and discrete. For a philosophy of plenitude, the distance, internal as well as external, separating the appearance of discrete things must originate from an incision operated on the compact and undifferentiated whole by an act endowed with some practical intent. To the extent that the incision is artificial, the underlying reality remains one of confused heterogeneity in which nothing protrudes and is, for this reason, full and complete at any time. Such a reality is constantly changing, but the change does not emanate from discrete things: it is the interpenetrating whole that changes, "as with the turning of a kaleidoscope."² It is easy to see that any localization of change in the total change can only occur through relativization by means of discrete and fixed things. In this way, the movement of a discrete thing will be determined in relation to fixed references so that it is reduced to "a variation of distance, space being thus supposed to precede motion."³ This representation of an empty framework that reality comes to fill is none other than the source of the turn of mind that gives precedence to nothingness over being.

As long as we focus on the heterogeneous whole, nothing appears as contingent owing to the absence of distinction. But if we isolate a thing and extract it from the whole, its existence can only be seen as contingent, thereby raising such questions as why it exists and why it is what it is. And as we end up by considering the whole as the sum of individualized things, we progressively extend contingency to the whole, with the consequence that we confront the most perplexing and distressing of all questions, namely, why is there something, why not nothing? Since the question does no more than implying that existence is "a conquest over nought," it affirms the logical precedence of nothingness over being on the grounds that of all things only nothingness does not require explanation.⁴ However, while it is true that nothingness does not require explanation, it is also true that, nothing being nothing, it does not explain anything. Accordingly, there is no possible transition from nothingness

to being, and the question of why there is something and not nothing leads us to an impasse.

Since the primacy of nothingness seems undeniable, what else is left to account for existence but to posit a logical Being, alone able to be without requiring any explanation or precedence? Indeed, a purely logical existence “seems to be self-sufficient and to posit itself by the effect alone of the force immanent in truth.”⁵ The statement *A is A* is independent of time and place; it is eternally true in that its being or becoming untrue is inconceivable. The existence of a particular circle is contingent, but the essence of the circle is true independently of time and place: it neither begins to be true nor is capable of becoming untrue. In being eternally true, it defies the primacy of nothingness. In thus superseding the logical primacy of nothingness with an eternal Being, we derive things from acts of creation. Creation does not remove contingency since it pulls things out of nothing, and in so doing inserts an ontological discontinuity between the act of creation and the created things. In other words, what we have here is not self-creation, but creation *ex nihilo*.

For Bergson, since the continuity of duration excludes discontinuity, there is no basis to think of creation as an appearance out of nothing. This is to say that for him “creation *ex nihilo* never occurred, for no other reason than that *nihil* is a non-concept, an empty word.”⁶ The charge that nothing is an “empty word” can be highly contested in view of its extensive use in philosophy, as well as in the ordinary judgments of people. The point, however, is that, as suggested in the previous chapter, if nothing is just nothing, whatever we claim to grasp by means of negation is not a determination. To define an object as not being this or that indicates, not what the object is, but what the state of mind of the negating subject is. Granted that humans frequently use all forms of negation, the crucial question is then: what do they exactly mean by those negations and what is their proper field of application? Negation remains an “empty word” if it does not apply to being as such, but to a certain way of representing being. This certain way conveys a subjective meaning because it signifies being as it relates to our activity. Though ontologically empty, humans use negation to signify their practical relations with being, which of course are expressive of our needs and expectations.

The best way to demonstrate convincingly that negations and negative judgments do not have an objective meaning is to prove that nothing is neither imagined nor conceived. To begin with imagination, Bergson

shows that the attempt to annihilate the world and everything it contains succeeds except for the consciousness that effects the annihilation. Evidently, I cannot imagine the annihilation of my consciousness without generating another consciousness witnessing the annihilation. Abolishing my consciousness “becomes an object for an imaginary self which now perceives as an external object the self that is dying away,” and this proves that even my imagination cannot really visualize complete nothingness.⁷ In failing to imagine nothingness, I assert the primacy of being and invalidate the supposition that being is added to a prior nothingness. If I cannot remove being even by my imagination, then I confirm being as an unavoidable presence.

As to the conceptual content of negation, the argument is that nothingness is an idea rather than an image. Bergson has no trouble in showing that the alleged idea is self-destructive in that it is contradictory. If the operation to annihilate particular objects or internal states is already quite equivocal, then how much more so may be the idea of a conceptual annihilation of everything? The annihilation of everything is as contradictory as the representation of a square that would be at the same time a circle. Annihilate a particular object in thought and consider what is really represented. What you have in mind is a void unoccupied by the object, that is, a void that has some contour. The void thus signifies an absence, which refers to the memory of the annihilating act. What is really represented is, therefore, not nothingness, but an absence, which involves either the past or some expectation. In both cases, my subjectivity is in play and the negation it effects can only be in the form of replacing what is negated by its absence. As absence, my negation is haunted by the phantom of the negated object. If, instead of particular objects, we apply the annihilation to everything, the result will not be different. In the act of annihilating everything, we cannot discard the memory of the full plus the desire to effect the annihilation. The inability to remove the representation of the full means that its presence lurks behind the idea of nothingness. So that, what we call the representation of nothingness is self-contradictory because it has no determination of its own except by referring to what it negates. The concept of nothingness does not really signify nothing, since what it claims to represent is not nothing but the act of negating the whole without ever being able to get rid of it.

The alleged logical primacy of nothingness is no longer defensible in view of the fact that there is more in the representation of nothingness than in that of being. As we saw, nothingness retains the representation

of what is negated plus the act of negating it. From the fact that nothingness is never conceived follows the conclusion that negative ideas have no ontological standing. How could they have any such scope if the power to annihilate is just a substitution, that is, an affirmation that we suppress? Negation does not produce any idea, any more than a simple wish causes change. As argued in the previous chapter, the statement that the table is not white expresses nothing objective: I am just preventing the possible erroneous affirmation that it is white or correcting a previous belief that it was white. In short, negation does not affirm an objective non-reality.

By showing that nothingness is never conceived, Bergson does no more than reject the so-called fundamental question of metaphysics as a false problem. Indeed, the question of why there is something rather than nothing presupposes the logical primacy of nothingness over being. As just shown, the alleged primacy is an illusion: the negation of being does not give the representation of nothing, but a back and forth between being and nothingness. Unsurprisingly, it is because the claim to conceive nothingness is contradictory that philosophers were unable to give a satisfactory answer to the “fundamental question” of philosophy.

The Hegelian philosophy could be considered as a good illustration of Bergson’s criticism of negative ideas. Like Bergson, G. W. F. Hegel takes note of the back and forth between being and nothingness, but concludes that it signifies their identity, not the emptiness of the idea of nothingness. In his view, the continuous movement of the mind from the one to the other is caused by the lack of determination of the concept of being. To quote Hegel, “this mere Being, as it is mere abstraction, is therefore the absolutely negative: which, in a similarly immediate aspect, is just Nothing.”⁸ Lacking determination, the abstract concept of Being identifies with Nothingness. The attribution of the lack of determination not to Nothing but to Being inserts negativity within Being. The insertion enables Hegel to launch Being in pursuit of determination and therefore to think change as self-development. For Bergson, however, the lack of determination does not amount to abstractness; instead, as we saw in the previous chapter, it signifies virtuality or the one as undifferentiated multiplicity. The abstract is precisely the distinct determination in the very sense that it presupposes the act of isolating from a given matrix. The concrete understood as indistinct multiplicity thus disavows any identity between being and nothingness, and the back and forth between the two is caused not so much by the lack of

determination as by the hollowness of the idea of nothingness. Since the reduction of the idea of nothingness to an empty word deprives the negative of all dynamism, the dialectical movement by means of internal opposition becomes nothing more than a purely verbal contest in a mental oscillation between opposite concepts.

THE NEGATIVITY OF ACTION

To the extent that negation yields nothing positive, it makes sense only when we relate it to a mind with desires and expectations. So framed, negation means that a certain presence is denied in favor of another desired presence. To quote Bergson, “*the representation of the void is always a representation which is full and which resolves itself on analysis into two positive elements: the idea, distinct or confused, of a substitution, and the feeling, experienced or imagined, of a desire or a regret.*”⁹ Accordingly, the Bergsonian critique of the idea of nothingness perfectly accommodates the conditions of a legitimate use of negation and negative ideas. To say that negation expresses nothing but a substitution or a suppressed affirmation denotes its non-speculative nature. It expresses a mind concerned not so much with cogitation as with practical issues. It follows that the error of negative thinking lies in the transposition of a psychological operation to the ontological level, which transposition naturally breeds false problems.

Given the inability of negation to deliver a content of its own, it is plain that being does not incorporate non-being. Rather, as Bergson would say in perfect agreement with Jean-Paul Sartre, the human is “by whom nothingness comes into the world.”¹⁰ The demonstration that negation is devoid of determination places it squarely in the subjective realm while also accounting for the negative appearance of being. The projection of desire onto being is certainly how that which is not wanted can assume a negative status due to its apprehension in opposition to what is desired. In other words, the negative “does not have an object but a function,” that is, the function of signifying absences for a desiring and acting subject.¹¹ Whether the object is rejected or coveted, its existence is expressed in terms of not being what is wanted or not yet being real.

This understanding of the negative is none other than an extension of the opposition that Bergson establishes between space and time beginning his first book. The opposition between being and nothing and that

of space and duration overlap because both originate from the disparity between speculation and action. In effect, is not the function of space to divide and dismantle the continuity of duration for the sake of action and social life? Speaking of the impact of space, Bergson writes:

The whole of matter is made to appear to our thought as an immense piece of cloth in which we can cut out what we will and sew it together again as we please. Let us note, in passing, that it is this power that we affirm when we say that there is a *space*, that is to say, a homogeneous and empty medium, infinite and infinitely divisible, lending itself indifferently to any mode of decomposition whatsoever.¹²

To divide and cut out at will indicates the manner spatializing inserts holes into the full or compact reality of the given. Thanks to these holes, some aspects of the compact reality protrudes while others are removed from the scene.

To give one example, the operation by which life uses negation as a weapon to dismantle reality and select what it needs is fully functional in the act of perception. To isolate and juxtapose distinct objects, perception needs an empty canvas on which it spreads out the indistinct heterogeneity of the given. As we saw in the last chapter, by inserting void into given aspects of reality, we isolate objects in accordance with our needs. Bergson highlights the operation when he explains that the function of vision is “not to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being encased in its surroundings as a *thing*, should detach itself from them as a *picture*.”¹³ In this way, we have a fragmented vision while the underlying reality retains the fullness, continuity, and unity of duration. In this indivisible continuity, everything interpenetrates and nothing stands out.

The example of perception confirms that the injection of void into the structure of reality, though devoid of speculative value, is crucially important for life. Negation emanates from the heart of vital activity, since what impels action is the desire for another reality. Action is by essence negativity; it aspires to change the given reality, and so, by vocation, considers the given as contingent, as what should not have been or no longer deserves to be. If consciousness ceased to see the given as contingent, it would cease to be practical. The precedence of non-being over being is just this longing for another reality and it

manifests by projecting on the given a prior nothingness that both makes it contingent and announces its coming displacement. Accordingly, the contingency of the given is not so much an ontological status as a vision inspired by nihilation, to use Sartre's expression, which is itself the act of positioning the world for our action.

Needless to say, the stated similarity between Sartre and Bergson should not be pursued beyond a certain limit. Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts the matter in clear terms. He acknowledges some convergences, but he also insists on the unbridgeable differences separating the two philosophers. Thus, he notes that for both of them "the object taken in itself is all that it is."¹⁴ A quarter of the moon is a full being; it is quarter only to the human being. Though Sartre and Bergson perfectly agree in attributing the presence of lack and absence in the world to human subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the convergence is a paradox, given that "one is essentially a positivism and the other a negativism."¹⁵ Sartre and Bergson drastically separate being and nothingness but only to go in opposite directions, the latter placing consciousness in the ontological category and the former maintaining that the condition by which consciousness can introduce nothingness is that the human is "the being who is his own nothingness."¹⁶

Bergson would say that Sartre's argument that nihilation is possible if there is not a being of consciousness but only consciousness of being simply repeats the confusion between the speculative and the practical. Just as the projection of void draws the distinct and isolated objects of external perception, so too consciousness objectifies its own self by fragmenting and juxtaposing its own internal states at the expense of the underlying continuity of its duration. In both cases, there is objectification for the purpose of practical life. By its very essence nothingness cannot affect being; it is only concerned with the representation of being. But then, if the representation of nothingness is about action and action alone, Sartre cannot make the conclusion that the ontological divestment of consciousness is the condition of conscious phenomena. To be conscious of something has to do with objectification for the purpose of action; it is not indicative of the nothingness of consciousness. To say otherwise posits a dualism between being and consciousness whose consequence is "to ontologize or substantivize nothingness."¹⁷ If nothingness is essence, and not what emanates from a being, how else can we think of its presence but by opposing it to being, which opposition is unthinkable without some implicit ontologization?

This ontologization is not what Sartre wants but it is also what he cannot avoid: opposing being to nothingness is contradictory, and so necessarily generative of inconsistency.

Unlike Sartre, Bergson can mix the negative and the positive at the level of practical life while excluding the negative at the ontological level, thereby consistently adhering to the idea that nothing is not in any form or shape. This presence of a positivism free of any inconsistency is particularly highlighted in Gilles Deleuze's reading of Bergson. Deleuze defends the idea of Bergson's flawless positivism by reminding that "a central theme of his philosophy" is "the critique of the negative and of the negation, in all its forms as sources of false problems."¹⁸ The impact of Deleuze's reading was such that one author writes, "after Gilles Deleuze, we got used to the idea that the Bergsonian critique of negative ideas, completely developed in *Creative Evolution*, rang the death knell of negativity and dialectics."¹⁹

The more one highlights the consistency of Bergson, the harder it becomes to ignore that Bergsonism is replete with polarizations, such as the oppositions between space and duration, quantity and quality, matter and memory, instinct and intelligence, contraction and relaxation, matter and vital *élan*.²⁰ While most of these oppositions belong to the psychological level expressing the negativity inherent in the acting subject, the opposition between matter and life takes us to the ontological level, with the consequence that it casts doubt on the consistency of Bergsonian positivism. The definition of matter as the opposite of life introduces negation into duration itself, since matter is conceived both as a specific level of duration and the negative that life must overcome to develop and realize itself. That Bergsonian ontology includes negativity is the view of two influential authors, namely, Merleau-Ponty and Vladimir Jankélévitch. Even if their dissenting position originates from different concerns, they compel us to confront head on the question, to wit, is negativity part of Bergsonian ontology and if yes, how could this inclusion of an idea unambiguously rejected in *Creative Evolution* avoid the demolition of the whole system?

CONTROVERSY OVER NEGATIVITY

Let me begin with Merleau-Ponty who, unlike Jankélévitch and all those who speak of acclimatized integration of negation, maintains that Bergsonian positivism failed in its attempt to completely purify ontology

from negative ideas. He writes: "Bergson's positivism is certain. There is in his work an effort to enter into contact with Being without encumbering himself with any negative idea. Nevertheless Bergson does not elude the idea of Nothingness."²¹ Willy-nilly, he had to reinsert negative ideas because he could not draw dualistic conclusions from a consistent positivism. In other words, Bergson's determination to reconcile his vision of the unity of nature with dualism explains his inconsistency.

In Merleau-Ponty's eyes, what defines Bergsonism is a "movement between the positive and negative," a constant oscillation that reaches the positive via the negative.²² Though not recognized, the oscillation shows that the negative is not so much rejected as incorporated into the positive. To give some examples, without the power of negativity of intelligence, intuition is just instinct, just as life would remain vague and formless without the inverse movement of matter. Likewise, perception would be mere coincidence and unable to discern without the void inserted into the continuity of the given, just as memory would be useless without the negative function of forgetting. Merleau-Ponty goes further by exposing the presence of negativity in the center of the Bergsonian ontology. He argues that positivism is incompatible with a philosophy of duration, which upholds the reality of creative change. Bergson expressly criticizes the attribution of eternity and immutability to the idea of existence, thereby defining existence by unpredictability and novelty. In so doing, he is advocating a contingent conception of existence, which is unthinkable without the injection of negativity into the idea of existence. Indeed, not only does a contingent thing appear by negating a previous thing owing to its very novelty, but also its unpredictability posits a prior nothingness, since contingency means that the thing was not even possible before its appearance.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson's inconsistency particularly stands out in Chapter III of *Creative Evolution* when he shifts toward dualism to the detriment of the monistic principles that he had followed so far. In the previous chapters, life "indissolubly [composed of] means and ends" is studied as an operation rather than an entity, and so is inseparably tied to materiality.²³ In Chapter III, all this changes in the direction of attributing the status of "a transcendent reality" to the *élan vital*.²⁴ The latter is defined as psychological in nature and the physical is derived for it. Conceived as an inversion of life itself, matter becomes an obstacle that life must overcome. What else does the designation of matter as an obstacle imply but the incorporation of the negative into

the purported positivism of Bergson? The conception of matter as an obstacle means that organic manifestations are just means in the march of life toward emancipation from materiality. Thus, the eye does not produce vision; it is just a canalization obtained by circumventing the obstacle of materiality. In short, the introduction of dualism unties life from matter and the previously stated unity of nature must appeal to and “cede its place to God.”²⁵

Without denying the difficulties inherent in Bergson’s attempt to integrate monism and dualism, one can rightly accuse Merleau-Ponty of ignoring the distinction that Bergson establishes between the ontological and psychological levels. As previously emphasized, Bergson has never denied the role of the negative in the ordinary functions of life, be it perception or memory. Similarly, Bergson has insisted all along on the close connection between intelligence and intuition, since the task of intuition is primarily to sew the cuts and discontinuities that intelligence inserts into the given reality for the purpose of action. Intuition does not incorporate the negative in its vision; the negative is what it must overcome or undo to access the deeper reality. Intuition both presupposes and overcomes intelligence: it works with materials handed down by intelligence, but it does not integrate them since the task of the speculative is to correct the practical vision. As to the contingency of existence, it does not implicate negativity. True, to speak of creation goes against the idea of existence as an unfolding logical process, but it does not mean that there is negation, discontinuity between the old and the new. True creation involves duration, and where duration is involved, the new, as stated in the previous chapter, is not negation of the old; it is differentiation within continuity, and so denotes a swelling rather than a rupturing process. The absence of rupture in creative continuity indicates that the term “contingency” signifies novelty and unpredictability without, thereby, conveying the sense of a fortuitous or accidental occurrence.

Where Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms seem to become relevant is when he denounces contradiction at the ontological level, that is, within the conception of the *élan* making materiality into an inverse movement of life. Doubtless, matter is presented as a negative and Bergson does not hesitate to underline the opposition by referring repeatedly to “the resistance of inert matter” as “the obstacle that life had first to overcome.”²⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s contention that Bergsonian positivism ends up by incorporating negation could not find a better illustration than the *élan*’s composition of two movements that are inverse of each other, to wit,

an ascending movement and an inverse descending movement resulting in materiality. Whether one agrees or not with the idea of a vital élan, one thing is sure: given that the very conception of the élan implies that the ascending movement is inseparable from the descending movement, the Bergsonian dualistic inference according to which life progressively emancipates itself from materiality cannot be made without a flagrant contradiction.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Paul-Antoine Miquel rejects Bergson's dualistic inferences but situates the inconsistency elsewhere. Miquel notes that Bergson advances a revolutionary thesis in his conception of the élan as the unity of two inverse movements. Reflecting on Bergson's vision of "*a reality which is making itself in a reality which is unmaking itself*," Miquel finds that the wrong interpretation is to think that what is being unmade is opposed to what is being made in a way similar to the opposition of an affirmation to its negation.²⁷ Instead, the correct interpretation is to acknowledge that life is active out of its own passivity so that "matter ... participates in the definition of life itself. It does not oppose it."²⁸ The introduction of opposition precisely leads to the Bergsonian inconsistent shift toward dualism, since it generates the view that evolution is how life progressively emancipates itself from matter into which it was originally incorporated. In effect, speaking of the emergence of the human, Bergson writes, though the vital impetus is finite and cannot overcome all obstacles, "at one single point the obstacle has been forced, the impulsion has passed freely. It is this freedom that the human form registers."²⁹ Miquel argues that this dualistic "position is untenable" in light of the inseparability of the two movements making up reality.³⁰ Put otherwise, to insert opposition into Bergsonian monism is to draw Bergson toward spiritualism; it is to miss the revolutionary side of his thought, which he himself, it is true, was reluctant to espouse with all the implications.

Unlike Merleau-Ponty's charge of inconsistency, Miquel's interpretation introduces the idea of a negative that is not oppositional. The criticism of nothingness and negation does not rule out the existence of a Bergsonian negativity whose defining feature is to propose, as one author puts it, a "positive conception of negativity."³¹ The nature of a positive negativity posits an immanent operational negativity, and so avoids the formation of two opposing poles. In this operational unity, matter is not ontologically opposed to life; rather, it represents a resistance resulting in the progressive intensification of life. As Miquel sees it, resistance is a negativity that does not produce an ontological dualism. It differentiates

and intensifies life without yielding any transcendent outcome. In short, there is no struggle or conflict between life and matter, as is the case in a dialectical relationship.

Miquel's rejection of oppositional thinking in Bergsonism admits the presence of negativity, but one that is only operational. Bergson is inconsistent, not because he assigns to life an inverse movement to the movement of matter, but because he interprets the inversion in the direction of dualism, thereby forgetting his own view on the unity between life and matter. Miquel's acceptance of a Bergsonian negativity contrasts with the interpretation of Jankélévitch and others, who defend the inclusion of the negative in Bergson's ontology with the view of justifying his dualistic shift. Let us now review their arguments.

NEGATION WITHOUT NOTHINGNESS

For Jankélévitch, the restriction of negativity to the sphere of subjectivity only is not a defensible position for the reason that it misses Bergson's account of the nature and movement of matter. Negativity is involved in the ontological process, in the generation of matter itself as an inverse movement of life. This theme of inversion gives reality to the negative. Jankélévitch's definition of Bergson's philosophy as "a *monism* of substance, a *dualism* of tendency" sums up the rejection of the traditional dualism of two substances, matter and spirit, and its replacement with one substance involving two movements inverse of each other.³² As is the case with Miquel's interpretation, the presence of two opposed movements within the same substance means that there is a positive and a negative, but in such a way that "the relation of the negative to the positive is a relation of polarity, and not of contradiction."³³ The opposition between two movements is simply operational, unlike the opposition between two substances, which would bring back the already discarded opposition between being and nothingness. For matter to contradict life, it would have to be non-life, a view that Bergson excludes when he defines matter as a form of duration.

This is to say that Bergsonism incorporates negation, but with the understanding that "this negation is not pure and simple nothingness."³⁴ As stated in the previous chapter, matter participates in duration and this participation excludes any substantial opposition between life and matter. Though its duration is extremely relaxed, compared to the tense duration of consciousness, it nevertheless indicates that matter is not the

absolute other but the lowest degree of durational tension, not non-being but the lowest degree of being. In eliminating contradiction between substances and reintroducing it in the tendencies, Bergson changes it into polarization, thereby framing the vision of a being defined by an internal tension.

The polarization in tendency is the reason why Bergson maintains that the vital impetus “is finite, and [that] it has been given once for all. It cannot overcome all obstacles.”³⁵ In its manifestations, the *élan* cannot avoid the opposite tendency of materiality or do anything without encountering its resistance. Even less can it emancipate itself completely since it carries the opposite tendency within itself. The best it can do is to reach “a *modus vivendi*, which is organization,” the perfected form of which is the human body.³⁶ However, in injecting finiteness into the *élan*, materiality contributes to two positive outcomes: “first it *divides and specifies*, then it *provokes an effort*.”³⁷ To overcome the resistance of matter, life had to divide into different species and individual bodies by which it narrows itself and gains in intensity and efficiency, just as it originally turned into an effort, an impetus thanks to the resistance offered by matter. Without matter, life would still exist but devoid of vitality, of *tonus* and therefore would be unable to realize anything.

In light of Jankélévitch’s explanation, can it be said that incorporating a negativity that is simply polarizing instead of being substantial into the *élan* itself is enough to disprove Merleau-Ponty’s allegation of contradiction? For Jankélévitch, there is a good usage of negation as long as it is not derived from nothingness and remains strictly operational. Still, it is very difficult to clear Bergson of the accusation of inconsistency each time an ontological rather than a subjective role is attributed to negation. Let us not forget that the profound message of Bergson’s critique of nothingness and negation is to state, in agreement with Sartre, that the defense of the ontological status of negation is an anthropomorphic, a “human, all too human” approach, and that nature has no use for negation. Moreover, to see matter as the negative leads directly to the classic type of spiritualist dualism. In effect, unlike Miquel, Jankélévitch is quick to state that matter is “without reservation the absolute negativity of the anti-vital principle.”³⁸ Not only is life in conflict with matter, but it can be said that “the body is thus there only to be vanquished. Life does not need the body; on the contrary, it would very much like to be alone and go straight to its goal.”³⁹ Such expressions cannot signify anything other than a downright fall into a traditional type of spiritualist dualism.

I am not saying that Bergson is not describing the relation of life to matter in terms of conflict and opposition; he does, and in many places. But one must be careful not to assign an ontological meaning to such dualistic expressions. Bergson cannot avoid using them as long as he undertakes an intellectual analysis of duration, which operates by means of contrast opposing the negative to the positive, the changing to the unchanging, the eternal to time, freedom to necessity, etc. Such oppositions are legitimate, provided they are viewed as necessary stepping stones to the integrative knowledge of intuition, whose task is precisely to dissolve oppositions into the unifying vision of durational monism. Consequently, either Bergson contradicts himself or terms like “opposition” and “obstacle” that he uses to describe matter must be understood in a non-negative way. To reiterate my point, I do not see how Jankélévitch’s interpretation clears Bergson of the accusation of contradiction or inconsistency in light of Bergson’s insistence that negation is subjective and that there is no negative reality.

I see no better way to reappraise Jankélévitch’s interpretation than to show that no sooner does he assign a negative role to matter than he corrects it by adding its positive function. Thus, he defines matter as “a yoke” without which life would have accomplished “miracles,” after admitting that it specifies life and provokes effort.⁴⁰ Further insisting on its positive role, he writes that matter “is originally the trampoline whose spring has projected the vital *élan* onto the increasingly ramified paths of evolution. This is expressed by the image itself of *élan* or growth.”⁴¹ This oscillation indicates that Jankélévitch, unable to remain faithful to the notion of an operational negation, pushes it toward a full-blown opposition between matter and life. This wavering outcome invites the need to transcend the opposition between matter and life in the direction of a different, more cooperative type of relationship if one is to exonerate Bergson from the charge of self-contradiction. The lesson is that once negation is introduced, it becomes difficult to avoid a dualistic interpretation, unless one goes to the extent of rejecting, as does Miquel, the spiritualist component of Bergsonism as an improper extension.

What is not clear with Jankélévitch is how something that acts as a springboard to life is also that against which life has to affirm itself. Materiality is here not the enemy, the one that must be vanquished; rather, it is on the side of life. The *élan* does not work against matter; it is *élan* thanks to matter. To visualize this relationship, one must get out of dualism and see it as self-inversion yielding the phenomenon of

effort on oneself. This structure of life as self-effort is the one suggested by Bergson's view of a reality which is making and unmaking itself all at once. We do not have two realities or tendencies; it is the same reality that is making and unmaking itself. It does so because it inverses itself so that it pushes itself by itself, so to speak. The inversion of the same is *élan*, oneness actualized as effort, internal tonus. The dualism of tendency is not polarization; it is being as self-striving or self-determining.

Effort must not be taken in the psychological sense of exertion triggered by lack or the desire of something, which would implant nothingness in being. At the ontological level, there is no tending towards something; nor is there being pushed by any external thing. Bergson has sufficiently insisted on the fact that life transcends both mechanism and finalism. The impetus receives no help from outside, just as it is not impacted externally. The intellectual conception can decompose being into an *élan* countered by materiality, which is a legitimate approach to objectify nature. However, the intuitive grasp fuses the ascending and descending movements and obtains the vision of an effort directed not toward a goal but self-overcoming. The finitude of the *élan* enters into the equation, since only a finite reality can overcome itself. Materiality does not limit life from outside; life limits itself to overcome itself. Therefore, matter is life inverting itself to surpass itself. Inversion yields self-limitation. A deeper look at the phenomenon of self-overcoming is needed to strengthen my arguments.

THE STRIVING OF SELF-LIMITATION

One important outcome of the previous chapter was the finding that duration signifies self-effort. Duration or taking time means that something is being made and this gestation is neither an unfolding process nor the progressive realization of a plan, still less a mechanical product. This is exactly what the unity of life and matter means: it stands for the maximum level of *détente* or extensivity, the very one triggering an inversion or a bouncing reaction. It is indeed safe to assume that the maximum level of *détente*, by the very fact that it can no longer continue, can only inverse itself, like a pendulum swings back to its equilibrium position from its position of maximum displacement or the yo-yo bounces back up subsequent to its descending movement. The downward movement of the yo-yo symbolizes the notion that matter is an inversed will, a will that is simply unfolding, discharging its contents

instead of gathering and propelling itself forward. The bouncing back upward suggests the ascending movement of life, while also showing that it is just the same downward movement (monism) endeavoring to recuperate itself, so to speak. The point, however, is that the inversion is unable to launch the whole in the direction of ascent as it faces the necessity that is characteristic of a descending movement. The best it can do is to put a brake on the descending trend. To quote Bergson, “incapable of *stopping* the course of material changes downwards, it succeeds in *retarding* it.”⁴² This retardation explains why material processes, although otherwise determined, take time to occur. I must wait for the sugar to melt even though its dissolution is determined because of the inverse process that retards, in default of stopping it, the automatism governing the downward trend of materiality. Put in other words, the difference between the two movements is that the recuperation movement is creative—instead of being merely mechanical—because it must overcome the necessity resulting from its descent. In not being mechanical, the bouncing back converts itself into effort, that is, operates in a delayed mode and this temporalization is how it invents.

It can be said that the act of retarding prevents an ontological crash or the pulverization of matter into nothingness, that is, into pure space. Precisely, the movement of détente never reaches the level of complete disintegration because of the retarding effect of the ascending trend. This impossibility is the reason why matter does not go all the way of its tendency, but bounces back, so to speak, as ascent or life putting a break on the dive into nothingness. When what is supposed to end instantly is retarded, it turns into “a present which is always beginning again,” and this extremely rapid repetition is given as extension owing to the continuity of the retarding act.⁴³ Unable to condense the moments into each other, the act juxtaposes them, thereby taking a spatially extended form, which is then the spreading of what continuously appears and disappears.

The inability to inverse means that life, which is then materiality itself but oriented upwardly, has to divide to circumvent necessity and proceeds on divergent lines specializing on the development of some functions in default of being able to develop the whole of life. Referring to the oneness of life, that is, to the oneness of the ascending movement and to the contingent appearance of different forms of life, Bergson writes: “*It is as if a vague and formless being, whom we may call, as we will, man or superman, had sought to realize himself, and had succeeded only by abandoning a part of himself on the way.*”⁴⁴ The abandoned part is

represented by the animal and vegetable forms of life whose appearance and activities made human life possible.

None of these forms of life was either determined or planned, and all stemmed from a creative activity inscribed in the effort of life to inverse the downward trend of reality. Since the need to circumvent necessity fragmented the original unity of life, the various forms of life are all inventions and, as such, dependent on the encountered conditions and on the ramifications of the vital activity. Only two things are not contingent: “(1) a gradual accumulation of energy; (2) an elastic canalization of this energy in variable and indeterminable directions, at the end of which are free acts.”⁴⁵ The indispensability of the two outcomes is easy to understand if we pay attention to the nature of duration. We said that life, unable to inverse the downward trend of materiality, settles for retarding it so that everything happens as though life was buying time by retarding automatism. This time is the time of elaboration and creation, the time during which solutions are sought for the inability to inverse the direction of materiality. Evidently, given the impossibility to inverse, there is only one solution left, namely, the conversion of materiality into an instrument of freedom. The descending trend of matter becomes usable if the retardation converts some part of it into stored up energy, which is then used to sustain free actions. Bergson considers the law of the degradation of energy as “the most metaphysical laws of physics” because it indicates “the direction in which the world is going” and this direction points to a relationship between matter and life that is one of rescue, so to speak, rather than of antagonism. In retarding and storing up the dissipating mutability of matter and in using it for creative purpose, life does no more than unfree what is trapped in the necessity of the descending trend.

The divergence between plants and animals is how life’s rescue mission is implemented in our solar system. Plants store up the solar energy through the chlorophyllian function and animals use the stored energy for free mobility in space.⁴⁶ The appearance of human beings further upgrades freedom from free mobility to self-creation, thereby accomplishing, it is true in a roundabout and truncated way, the original tendency of the inversion of the descending movement. In default of being able to inverse the direction of the whole, life managed to create mechanisms out of matter that are capable of converting the trapped creative force first into space mobility and then into freedom of the will and whose obvious significance is the continuation of the creative work of life. We thus come back to the same issue: creativity is given but requires

that we dig up the soil into which it is buried. I see no better image to express the relationship between the necessity of matter and the creativity of life than that of the bird breaking the shell and flying freely. The egg sustains the bird but also hampers its movement, not because it opposes life, but because the inversion or the organization that generates the egg reaches a limit beyond which it cannot go. In breaking free of the constraint, the bird takes the lead and crosses the limit. The organizing power of life having come this far, it is up to the product to continue the movement on its own. In this way, freedom is not just given; it is conquered and, as such, presupposes an initial liberation.

My contention is that those scholars who detect contradiction in the metaphysics of Bergson do so because they confuse the idea of limitation with opposition. While opposition turns materiality into a force pitted against life, the idea of limitation suggests the reaching of a *modus vivendi*, of a stoppage after both parties have given the maximum, their best contribution given the prevailing conditions. The idea of limitation is actually contained in the notion of inversion. The inability of life to overturn the trend of materiality is evidenced by the fact that the inversion could not proceed beyond a certain point and effectively reaches a limit. But it is imperative to understand that the reaching of a limit is also how the initiative passes to the living being. Having carried the organization of matter thus far, life passes on the torch to the living body.

The basic idea here is that life becomes transcendence only through self-limitation. If the *élan* of life is blocked by an external hurdle, there is no other demand than its mechanical removal or avoidance. By contrast, when the blockage is subsequent to an internal interruption or detente, the issue of removal turns into self-inversion, into climbing back up the slope of one's own relaxation, with the major consequence that the upward movement is distinctly exacting in comparison to mere interruption. Indeed, it demands nothing less than life surpassing itself, for only by providing more than its original donations, and so by inventing, can it succeed in remounting its descent. Since whatever is realized through self-limitation is victory over oneself, it shows that self-limitation is self-restraint, ascesis leading to self-creation over and above the mere removal of an impediment. Accordingly, as discipline of life, materiality stems from self-restraint or abnegation; as such, it is not so much polarization as a technique or a method of drawing more of life. Together, life and materiality produce the phenomenon of self-effort, that is, not only existence, but more importantly a striving existence, an *élan*.

The importance of the concept of self-limitation cannot be emphasized enough: it is how life creates living beings and not machines and, at a higher level, how creatures become creators. To elucidate this point, I take the case of Sartre who argues that freedom and the idea of God creating humans are incompatible because, in conceiving the essences of human beings prior to their existence, God proceeds in the same way as the artisan who fabricates a paper knife, the difference being simply that God is “a superlative artisan.”⁴⁷ The anteriority of essence over existence means that the latter is determined so that, as actualization of a prior conception, the appearance of existence is no different from the manner a tool is fabricated. It follows that freedom is possible only when “existence precedes essence,” that is, when existence is just what appears and essence is what existence makes of itself.⁴⁸

Sartre’s argument is correct, less so the conclusion that “existence precedes essence.” For the point is not that essence precedes or not existence, but that the essence is a limit, a stoppage demanding that the initiative passes to what has been achieved so far. In this way, existence inherits and continues the creativity of life. The fact of limitation is that by which life creates living beings and, at a higher level, living beings capable of creativity. In other words, there is still a human nature, which is not so much determining as providing resources to continue the movement further. That is why Bergson insists on the finite nature of the *élan vital*, stating its “force is limited, and ... it soon exhausts itself in its very manifestation.”⁴⁹ The attribution of limitation to the nature of the *élan* itself or to the opposition of materiality would be wrong because it would miss that the issue is to create creators, not puppets. An infinite *élan* [assuming it makes sense to speak of an effort that would be infinite] would be none other than God directly creating the universe, a conception that would land us in a deterministic pantheism in the manner of Spinoza.

The finitude of the *élan* derives from the task of inverting necessity, whose impossibility is precisely how it remains a striving force, that is, falls short of being a subject, an end in itself. As such, it cannot plan or set goals without, however, being blind, mechanical because it is upwardly oriented. It is in the true sense of the word *élan* and just *élan*. As to the contribution of materiality to the limitation of the *élan*, it is not one of opposition, since materiality is not anti-life but a distended form of life. The constantly undoing nature of matter owing to its downward trend sets limits to what life can accomplish. What all this suggests

is that the finitude of the vital *élan* is inscribed in the very oneness of the inversion and the descending tendency. The limitation is not due to an external factor that could be removed: it is that which is falling that is endeavoring not to fall in a context where there is no outside help or nothing to hang on to. In retarding the descent, the best that the inverse movement can do is to organize matter into living beings, as though to temporarily land them ashore.

The originality of Bergson lies in the conception of the creation of the world that implicates God without being the direct work of God. Doubtless, the *élan* of life derives from God, but it also stands between God and the world as an autonomous effort, precisely as the unity of matter and life, as an ascending movement that is immanent to the descending movement. The oneness of the two movements gives us the image of a slanted reality, a reality striving on its own. This self-effort is exactly how life limits itself to surpass itself, to be creative. The descending movement is none other than life becoming its own challenge so as to draw more from itself. The most suggestive image that Bergson gives of the generation of an autonomous self-effort is the raising of the arm:

Let us suppose that the arm, left to itself, falls back, and yet that there subsists in it, striving to raise it up again, something of the will that animates it. In this image of *a creative action which unmakes itself* we have already a more exact representation of matter. In vital activity we see, then, that which subsists of the direct movement in the inverted movement, *a reality which is making itself in a reality which is unmaking itself*.⁵⁰

Be it noted that the falling arm and the effort to raise it do not constitute two separate realities. The falling presupposes an interruption of the will; its materiality is nothing but the act of falling, that is, the undoing of the will itself. Since the same undoing will inverse itself, it faces itself as the challenge and hence becomes the effort of raising its own self. Such effort demands that the will surpasses itself, gives more than its original endowment. It is not only about returning to its previous state, it is about overcoming itself so as to be able to lift up the heavy burden resulting from its own interruption. To be successful, it must make or recreate itself so that what is achieved does not match with the initially given.

So conceived, not only does the concept of self-effort enable us to think of the unity in substance between life and matter, but it also points to a positive conception of materiality, to wit, materiality understood as

ascesis rather than opposition. Matter is not just an obstacle opposing life, but what life generates in order to enhance and surpass itself. More exactly, it offers resistance that is also a stimulus. Speaking of life as effort, Bergson writes: "This effort was impossible without matter. By the resistance matter offers and by the docility with which we endow it, is at one and the same time obstacle, instrument and stimulus."⁵¹ The positivity of conceiving matter as an obstacle that is also an instrument and a stimulus surely contrasts with Jankélévitch's view according to which "matter represents everything that goes against the course of life ... everything that resists the effort of consciousness."⁵² Such an interpretation suggests that there is effort independently of matter and that this effort is aimed at breaking its resistance. It connects life and matter externally and overlooks the fact that the effort in question is a coupled concept. In short, self-effort posits a structure of passivity and activity. True, in the objectified world of consciousness, effort is impelled by some desire and is applied against objects viewed as distinct and external. But in the non-objectified ontological realm, there is no distinction between an external object and the effort, between life and matter, given that the effort is internal to matter and geared towards its lifting, as suggested by the image of raising a fallen arm. The condition of an effort without distinction and desire is that the same reality must be doing and undoing itself. The whole purpose of the operation is that it draws more from itself than its original endowment.

To highlight the positive meaning of the resistance of matter, let me use analogies from the field of sport. Take the case of horizontal bar in a high jump contest. The elevated placement of the bar constitutes an obstacle, but even more so a stimulus to jump higher. Likewise, I can imagine a soccer game without goals and goalkeepers; what I cannot see is how such a "game" would require the deployment of any kind of effort. This is to say that what rules and hurdles represent in a sporting contest is comparable to the resistance offered by matter to life. Just as sport regulations are not contrary to sporting contests, the resistance of matter is not the opposition of an anti-life force. It is the catalyst for the self-transcendence of life.

Besides, every time Bergson speaks of the resistance of matter, he never turns it into an active resistance, as would be characteristic of an anti-life force. An active resistance would be one of effective confrontation struggling to pull life in a different direction. Instead, as shown by his repeated use of the expression "inert matter," Bergson thinks of

a passive resistance caused by the descending trend. To the extent that such resistance does not impart its own direction, the *élan* of life soon reaches a stoppage, a limit beyond which it cannot go. In other words, the resistance derives not from the fact of opposing, but from the inability of matter to cope with the complexity of life. That is why also, rather than confrontation, which would have resulted in failure, life uses tricks. It overcomes the resistance, the inadequacy of matter by “making itself very small and very insinuating, bending to physical and chemical forces, consenting even to go a part of the way with them, like the switch that adopts for a while the direction of the rail it is endeavoring to leave.”⁵³ The other word for ruse is creativity: only through creativity could life make matter do what otherwise it could not do, namely, become an instrument of freedom by lending its necessity to the generation of the living organism.

Deleuze’s insistence on the imperative of a non-negative reading of Bergson’s conception of the relation between life and matter drives from the understanding that the involvement of negativity misses the creative nature of life. For him, negativity does not square with Bergson’s view of life as problem posing and solving activity. In his own words, “life is essentially determined in the act of avoiding obstacles, stating and solving a problem. The construction of the organism is both the stating of a problem and a solution.”⁵⁴ Problems do not arise from the negativity of matter, but from the direction and complexity of life. Since the originator of the problems is life and not matter, the issue is obviously one of inadequacy rather than opposition. It is up to the creativity of life to invent the feasible solutions, which are therefore ways to circumvent the obstacles of materiality by using materiality itself. Surely, the act of posing and solving problems is quite different from that of battling an antagonistic, bellicose force.

The further we move away from the idea of polarization, the closer we become to framing the connection of life with matter in terms of complementarity. Such an approach transforms Jankélévitch’s “a *monism* of substance, a *dualism* of tendency” into a monism of substance, a complementarity of tendency. So conceived, the relationship becomes a work in tandem, each contributing its share and together achieving a common result, namely, self-overcoming. Matter contributes to its necessity whose outcome is to divide, specify, and activate effort; life contributes the *élan*, the ascending direction resulting in the creative work of organization. And since matter itself is an interruption of life, the unity of descent and

ascent gives the phenomenon of self-transcendence. Those who speak of negativity in Bergson can only see matter as an obstacle, and so overlook its positive aspect, namely, its complementarity, even collusion with the creativity of life. The term “collusion” is not excessive when we pay attention to self-creation, that is, to the fact that there is no outside help or push. For life to evolve by itself, what is needed is not—with due respect to Hegel—the negative, but an accomplice, that is, a defiant but malleable partner, not an antagonist. Such a partner provokes effort and lends itself to creative solutions, whereas active negativity requires the dialectical solution of negation of the negation resulting in the developed reaffirmation of the same. As discussed in the previous chapter, the first one invents, the second one simply evolves from an implicit to an explicit state, and so does not invent itself.

UNITY VERSUS ANALYSIS

The Bergsonian conception of the relation between life and matter becomes easier to grasp if one of the reasons for its difficulty is set aside. As already explained, the ease with which critics see contraries derives from the strong influence of practical life on our speculative habits. Here is a case in point. After admitting that Bergson has no place for the deficient, the empty, in a word, for the negative, and insisting that matter is not external to life, one author cannot resist calling the union “logically antithetical,” which, he specifies, means that “practically and concretely, it is a union of fertilization between the positive and the negative.”⁵⁵ In conceiving matter as a negative to life, one becomes unable to explain how Bergson overcomes dualism and, worse yet, avoids contradicting himself. Even a commentator like Dimitri Tellier, who seems to move in the direction of my interpretation, cannot quite make up his mind, since he writes, “it becomes necessary to consider matter no longer simply as opponent but also as adjuvant to the realization of spirit.”⁵⁶

To derive materiality from the act of interruption of life is to say that materiality is nothing but a fallen life so that materiality, understood in a non-mechanical way, is life striving to raise itself up. The oneness of ascent and descent, not their distinction and opposition, is what is ontologically real and is grasped as self-effort. Bergson’s demonstration that negations are substitutions that contain implicit affirmations tells us what we must avoid to think of the oneness of life and matter as the phenomenon of self-effort. Since negations are affirmations denied on subjective

grounds, the tendency to oppose life to matter, especially to see matter as the negative that life must subdue, is a misplaced generalization of the experience of practical life wrestling to control the material environment. From the vantage point of the unity of Being, the opposition dissolves into self-overcoming, that is, into Being lifting itself up by itself. What seems to create a problem is Bergson's description of the relationship between life and matter in the opposing terms of ascent and descent. The description convinced Jankélévitch that it is legitimate to recognize the existence of Bergsonian negation, provided one means polarization of movements and not of substances, which would reintroduce the phantom of nothingness. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty points out inconsistency, given that matter is included in the unity of substance as the negative that life must overcome and that there is an oscillation between the negative and the positive. The truth is that, in whichever way we justify the use of negativity, it remains irreconcilable with Bergson's critique of negative ideas. Instead, what we must show is that the confusion between the ontological and psychological levels is precisely what stands in the way of a non-negative conceptualization of the unity of matter and life.

Where intelligence grasps ascent and descent, the unifying or intuitive vision, that which transcends the distinction between subject and object, as shown in the first chapter of this book, first sees ascent as an inversion of descent in order to reassert their oneness in terms of substance. Deepening its unifying intent, it fuses ascent and descent into a single movement such that the mover is the moved and the moved the mover. It thus reaches the vision of self-movement or *élan*, which can be analytically decomposed into two movements inverse of each other, that is, as matter opposing life. Reconsider the example of one arm resisting the other arm. Viewed from outside, the two arms pull in opposite directions, but their unity is felt as tension or effort. To be sure, the deeper reality is the tension, not the two distinct and opposed movements. In the same way, life is the internal tension animating matter, retarding its fall, as attested by the expression "the universe *endures*," so that their oneness describes perfectly a striving mode of being, a universe spurred by the effort to surpass itself by itself.⁵⁷ Such a universe "lives on itself: its excrements are its food," to use Nietzsche's expression.⁵⁸ It is because matter is life challenging life that Bergson can say that it is simultaneously obstacle, instrument, and stimulus. One must keep in mind that the effort is not due to a lack that needs to be filled, which would insert negativity: self-effort is not pursuing any goal except its own surpassing.

Merleau-Ponty recognizes Bergson's attempt to unify life and matter by the vision of self-effort. He writes, "Bergson is very close to a philosopher who would define life not by rest, coincidence in itself, but by a labor of itself on itself."⁵⁹ Unfortunately, his commitment to dualism "turns him away from this path and leads him down another."⁶⁰ I argue that, had Merleau-Ponty paid attention to the distinction between the psychological and the ontological as well as to the manner intuition patches up what intelligence tears apart, he would disavow the charge of inconsistency. It is permissible to see matter and life as two distinct and polarized realities. But it is also possible to go beyond the intellectual level: when we transcend their distinction, we apprehend their unity as *élan*. It is no longer the reductive unity of materialism whose defect is that it never explains how pure mechanical processes generate life and its evolutionary path. Nor is it supporting idealistic reductionism, which is unable to account for the appearance of mind in intimate connection with a living body. It is not aligning with the finalist explanation of dualism, either, which avoids reductionism without, however, being able to transcend the polarity between life and matter. Finalism would transcend polarization if it adopts an immanent approach that considers matter not so much as an obstacle as a heavy weight trying to lift itself up. The heaviness is not a negative, an opposition to life, but an outcome of the fact that matter is trapped in its own necessity, without which there would not be any effort. To rise, the inner will has no other option than to circumvent necessity by creativity, that is, by the generation of living organisms, which are like small fissures through which something of the trapped self-lifting will pass.

To overcome the view presenting life and matter as opposites has the virtue of changing the usual understanding of the nature of life. Consider the example of marathon runners. According to the prevailing interpretation, their goal is for their will to defeat their body, which then is presented as the negative. In the Bergsonian perspective, it is to use the pain and the fatigue of the body to draw more from themselves and, consequently, surpass themselves. The purpose is not to vanquish the body, but to do more by exceeding its limitations. This explains why Bergson rejects the finalist approach to life. By assigning goals to life, finalism understands evolution as the realization of a plan, that is, as the fulfillment of lacking or missing components. It embeds negativity in the form of desire and aspiration in the very core of life, the consequence of which is that an end is assigned to life and its evolution.

Despite the express definition of life as *élan*, a critic like Renaud Barbaras, who obviously has trouble accepting the fact that Bergson has overcome dualism, criticizes him for not questioning “the traditional conception of life as satisfaction of *needs*.”⁶¹ According to Barbaras, needs limit life to self-conservation, forcing Bergson to assign the drive to go beyond the satisfaction of needs to a consciousness distinct of the body. To accuse Bergson of conceiving life and the living body as uniquely navel-gazing activities is at best a misreading, at worst a symptom of a preconceived aversion. What Barbaras attests is the same misconception, namely, the attribution of a negative relation between life and materiality to Bergson, despite his insistence on the continuity linking materiality, living beings, and consciousness as degrees of the same effort of reality to raise itself up. Once continuity is admitted, one has no reason to set one aspect against other aspects of the same reality.

We reach the view of an open and entirely creative process if, instead of conceiving of life as wanting this or that, we see it as an *élan*, as an indeterminate push to excel itself. When the effort is indeterminate and without any specific object, as suggested by the term *élan*, it becomes pure striving. Thus, the eye was created as an organ, not as a result of a prior plan, but as part of life’s overall striving to surpass itself. Needs are not driving life; they are rather used to enhance life. Again, the *élan* is not a will toward a goal; it is its own goal and, as such, it is a striving phenomenon. That is why the *élan* is not “pure consciousness,” still less “supraconsciousness”—that is, anything accountable in terms of subjectivity—but a push achieving unpredictable outcomes because its essence is to strive.⁶² Here one could speak of a blind force that, however, markedly differs from the blind and fortuitous process of the materialist because it is persistently striving, and so creating opportunity. Between a necessary and an accidental process, there is a place for a process that creates its own chance because it is effort-driven.

TRANSCENDING FINALISM AND MECHANISM

As regards distinct material objects, we know that they result from artificial cuts of the continuity of matter along the lines of our needs and capabilities. What about living bodies? Are they also artificial cuts? If yes, oneness does define life, but what becomes of the individuality of living organisms? Bergson’s answer is clear: “the living body has been separated and closed off by nature herself,” and so constitutes an individuality in

the true sense of the word.⁶³ But then, how does the individuality of the living bodies get reconciled with the oneness of life? The answer to this question obviously depends on the nature and mode of operation of the vital *élan*.

We have said that the *élan* of life is an inherent effort to raise from inside the descending trend of materiality. The fact that the effort is inherent in the descending trend settles the issue of Bergson's vitalism, since as Keith Ansell-Pearson reminds us, "if one of the central tenets of a vitalist position is to insist on a radical distinction between living and inert matter then Bergson is no vitalist."⁶⁴ As argued all along in this chapter, the view that the vital principle is distinct from materiality and introduced from outside is a misreading of the notion of *élan*, of the unity of life and matter inscribed in the very act of life countering and inverting its own interruption. The notion of *élan* would not overcome the difficulties of finalism and mechanism if life were not immanent to materiality. It is because the evolution of life cannot be explained by a distinct principle of planning, any more than it can be explained by a blind mechanical operation that Bergson appealed to the concept of *élan*. When both assumptions are rejected, what else remains to account for the evolution of life and its increasing complexity but an inherent act that looks like an effort? Effort is a tendency that significantly falls short of realizing a plan, just as it is not reducible to a mechanical operation because of its upward directionality. Once mechanical and teleological explanations are abandoned as well as any recourse to an external help, there is no explaining what evolution has accomplished without referring to an *élan*, an effort inside materiality itself. Not only does the absence of a planning principle mean that what is accomplished is an act of creation, but it also implies a progressive direction in view of the fact that what is higher requires effort, as opposed to the lower, which results from mere interruption or relaxation.

As we saw with Merleau-Ponty, many critics remain unconvinced of Bergson's success in overcoming dualism. Despite his strong assertion of the unity of life and matter, the fact remains that living beings are explained by an *élan*, that is, a principle transcending the physico-chemical laws governing nature. In fact, Bergson does not hesitate to admit that the *élan* is "of psychological nature."⁶⁵ In appealing to an immaterial notion, does not Bergson fall back on traditional dualism?

This objection overlooks the fact that the issue of dualism is not so much the distinction between the psychological and the material as

the inability to connect them, more exactly, to establish a transition from the one to the other by positing a monism that allows qualitative differences. As explored in the previous chapter, durational monism is precisely propitious to ontological differentiations emanating from the same substance. Moreover, the rational expectation is to provide an alternative theory, given the severe shortcomings of finalism and mechanism in their endeavor to explain the evolution of life. To maintain that any explanation must be based solely on physico-chemical laws is to refuse to acknowledge the problem, namely, the insufficiency of a purely materialist explanation. To be sure, we do not know everything about matter, but even so, any unilateral derivation of the psychic from the material will always retain the aura of an ontological miracle, even when the notion of chance is greatly emphasized in the hope of attenuating the asymmetry. As to finalism, its dualistic inspiration is not very helpful in explaining the evolution and imperfections of life. A plan presupposes an intelligent and transcendent planner and this provides neither the reason for an evolutionary process nor squares with the obvious limitations of life. By contrast, what squares with the necessity of evolution and limitation is the effort, with varying degrees of success, to turn physico-chemical laws into an instrument of freedom. As we saw, limitation, which generates striving, derives from life retarding the descending trend of materiality in default of being able to inverse it. Living beings represent various forms of the compromise achieved between the ascending and the descending trends of reality.

The debate between mechanism and finalism shows the necessity of positing some force that is not reducible to matter without this force being that of a Supra-Being. Materialism is right in what it denies, namely, the active presence of spiritual cause, but wrong in what it proposes, namely, the attempt to explain life and its evolution exclusively by material laws. Finalism is right in arguing that material laws cannot fully account for life, but wrong in its recourse to a spiritual cause. Since both are right in what they deny and wrong in what they propose, the way out, as Bergson sees it, is the notion of *élan* or effort as the only concept able to overcome the shortcomings of both finalism and mechanism. Effort is not derivable from the descending trend of matter, nor is it characteristic of a Supra-Being. What is *élan* does not proceed with a distinct and planned act of creation. On the contrary, it remains immanent to the created; it also takes time and its results are unpredictable inventions, which represent not so much perfections as breakthroughs.

Bergson attributes the apparent clarity of mechanism and finalism to the use of the model of manufacture, which agrees with the way our intelligence operates. The recourse of finalism to a preexisting plan reproduces the human method of first conceiving a plan and then materializing it by fashioning some material. The construction of an organism by means of a gradual accumulation of pieces, as argued by mechanism, uses the same model of manufacture minus the plan, which is often replaced by accident or chance. Putting both sides on an equal footing, Bergson writes, when mechanism “reproaches finalism with its anthropomorphic character, and rightly.... it fails to see that itself proceeds according to this method—somewhat mutilated!”⁶⁶ By contrast, the notion of *élan* is free of all anthropomorphic downsides because it is unable to manufacture. Being devoid of intelligence and externality, it cannot be in the business of manufacturing anything. Nor is it able to gradually build up an organism with the ability to metamorphose physico-chemical processes into psychological functions. It just does what an *élan* can do, namely, remove obstacles and liberate what has been neutralized in the descending direction of matter.

Unlike manufacturing, organization “works from the center to the periphery,” says Bergson.⁶⁷ This means two things: (1) there is no assembling an organism piece by piece; and (2) organization has the character of an explosion: rather than assembling parts, it starts small and grows by concentric waves, denoting a process of increasing differentiation. Evidently, organization does not create the function, which would have been the case if, as in a machine, the function is reducible to the sum of the parts used. As an internal push, organization does not collect parts; it sets aside impediments so as to let pass the function. In this way, the function is not reducible to the parts even though any malfunctioning of the parts can block the function. In the illuminating words of Bergson, the materiality of organization “*does not represent a sum of means employed, but a sum of obstacles avoided*: it is a negation rather than a positive reality,” negation referring here, not to contrariety, but to the dodging of a blockage.⁶⁸ The organizing power of the *élan* is comparable to the act of digging a tunnel to circumvent a mountain: as a work of canalization rather than of manufacture, it neither needs a preconceived plan nor a piece by piece buildup. Thus, the eye as an organ does not generate vision; it just channels stimuli into a center of indetermination (the brain), whose outcome is that the reciprocal determinations of material objects are actualized as vision, that is, as possible actions of the

living body. Clearly, the whole process does not fabricate vision; it simply actualizes vision by suspending the necessity that prevents it.⁶⁹

Since the whole issue is about avoiding obstacles, the cause need not be intelligent; it has just to be an effort, but one that is immanent to matter. The other finalist assumption, to wit, that life is distinct from materiality, turns the successes of organization into a mystery: it is like imagining a sculptor without a body modifying from outside a piece of wood. To think the unity between life and matter first requires an initial distinction, which is the moment of dualism, and second calls for the overcoming of the distinction, that is, the moment of integrative monism. The movement from dualism to monism or, which is the same thing, from intellectual analysis to intuition unifies the ascending and descending movements of life and matter in the vision of a slanted reality and in which "the terms of the dualism are shown to be two sides of a more primary term."⁷⁰

The point is that life can act on matter only if it coalesces with it. The organizational potential of this fusion is easy to imagine in light of the descending trend of matter. An upward inside push involves the ability to keep together that which tends to disperse or juxtapose. In so doing, it generates an interconnected and solidary whole, to wit, an organism for the reason that the component parts are tied to a center that makes them work in harmony. Though parts are connected in a machine, the movement of the whole results from a mechanical transmission and so is the sum of the moving parts. In an organism, however, the parts do not exist as real parts owing to the coordinating center and whose outcome is a self-generating and self-maintaining totality. In other words, the living body is not obtained by assembling distinct parts, but is instead the product of a process of differentiation of the same effort. The machine does not have an intrinsic and purposive unity because the designer remains external to what is designed and assembled piece by piece. And as the effort of differentiation progresses, the organism's complexity grows. The complexity indicates not the means used to generate a specific function, but the means used to evade the obstacles preventing it. Organisms liberate functions; they do not engender them. This approach should not come as a surprise given that, as expression of duration, the *élan* is a virtual notion, an indistinct multiplicity that can be diversely actualized depending on the condition of the descending direction of materiality.

To illustrate the operation of the *élan*, Bergson takes the case of the formation of an organ as complex as the eye and asks us to compare its

generation to a hand passing through iron filings. The push of the hand coordinates the filings into a definite form that is neither due to a design nor to a piece by piece buildup, being but a stoppage of the effort. Be it noted that whatever be the moment of the stoppage, the coordination of the filings into a specific form is necessarily complete and perfect for the reason that it is not the result of a step by step buildup but the product of an indivisible act. In other words, there is no correspondence between parts of the filings and parts of the push of the hand. Whatever the intensity of the push, the outcome is always complete because it is not a construction but a simple canalization, letting but also limiting the passage of the effort of the hand. The effort thus liberated is none other than the effort becoming conscious of itself and of its possible action on surrounding things, in a word, becoming perception. To quote Bergson, "the relation of vision to the visual apparatus would be very nearly that of the hand to the iron filings that follow, canalize and limit its motion."⁷¹ We admire the extremely complex nature and operations of living bodies because we cannot help but derive their existence from an act of construction, be it by appealing to a final cause or a mechanical buildup. But replace construction by *élan*, and it becomes clear that the complexity derives from our representation, less so from the procedure used to generate organisms.

THE ONENESS OF LIFE

In the eyes of many critics, neither the affirmation of the unity of life and matter nor the critique of finalism is enough to help Bergson overcome dualism as long as he operates with the notion of vital *élan* which, as he himself admits, is psychological in nature. What is more, the notion is paradoxically depriving living beings of vitality and creativity in favor of life, given that the *élan* is a transcendental entity generating living beings by overcoming the impediments of materiality. In Bergson, Barbaras notes, "life is not an attribute of the living being, but rather, the living being is a production of life."⁷² To the extent that life is hypostasized, it leads to the conclusion that living beings are alive, not because they are endowed with organization, but because they are the traces left by the creative work of life on matter. In the same vein, Georges Canguilhem argues that in ascribing creation to the *élan*, Bergson excludes the understanding of evolution as "the intrinsic possibility of the living to modify its norms according to the modifications of the external environments

of life.”⁷³ For Canguilhem, to reconstitute creativity to the forms of life themselves, we must conceive living beings as plastic enough to respond creatively to external challenges. The opposite happens with Bergson. Not only is life distinct from living beings, but also the latter are deprived of plasticity, being but impasses, arrested forms of the cosmic struggle between life and matter. This appeal to a psychic or metaphysical force defying the laws of matter is nowhere near to overcoming dualism. Moreover, it clashes directly with modern genetics, which is, by all accounts, “an anti-Bergsonian science,” since it “explains the formation of living forms by the presence within matter of what we call today information.”⁷⁴

Without denying the seriousness of the criticisms, one should be reminded that the attempt to refute a philosophical view on the basis of a scientific discovery presupposes a philosophical reading of the discovery. As such, it is less a refutation than a continuance of an already existing debate between opposing philosophical stands. Moreover, granted that the process of hereditary transmission occurs by means of a material component, it is not clear how the discovery refutes Bergson, given that he places himself beyond a dualistic distinction between life and matter and has sufficiently made clear that “*life is like a current passing from germ to germ through the medium of a developed organism.*”⁷⁵ It is not credible to assume that, in proposing such a hereditary transmission of the *élan*, Bergson excludes the involvement of a material component, even if he did not think of a genetic code storing information. The assumption that modern biology refutes Bergson is dependent on him being categorized as a vitalist. But as already specified, Bergson does not derive life from a principle external to matter, since life is not substantially distinct from matter. The difference is one of direction, and the two directions are so fused that the living being is their common outcome so that nothing happens that is not in conformity with materiality.

To come back to the properly philosophical interest of the notion of vital *élan*, namely, the affirmation of the inherent oneness of all forms of life, the notion offers the view of an indivisible creative effort taking diverse roads and achieving various degrees of success. In light of the unity of life, living beings represent differentiations of the same effort and are, for this very reason, complementary. Though it is legitimate for a scientific approach to explain the appearance of various forms of life by local empirical causes, the insufficiency of a purely mechanistic explanation probably convinced Canguilhem of the need to combine the

physico-chemical impacts of the environment with the inherent plasticity of living forms. In this way, changes and mutations remain local and the need to posit the metaphysical notion of vital *élan* becomes unnecessary. Yet, what is not clear here is whether the addition of the concept of plasticity really eliminates the reason why Bergson maintains that “we must no longer speak of life in general as an abstraction, or as a mere heading under which all living beings are inscribed.”⁷⁶

One of Bergson’s arguments for rejecting the view of life as mere abstraction or heading is the complementarity of forms of life, most dramatically illustrated by the ability of plants to directly accumulate the solar energy that animals use to perform their various functions. The realization of this crucial division of labor posits nothing else but the origination of plants and animals from the same *élan*. Another important argument is the resemblance of structure, for instance of the eye, on divergent lines of evolution. The question of how forms of life following different lines of evolution and living under different environments acquire structurally similar organs can hardly be answered satisfactorily if they are exclusively apprehended as products of local causes, be they accidental or not. By contrast, the similarity would be natural if it is due to “something of the impulsion received at the source,” that is, if the organs derive from the same *élan*.⁷⁷ This similitude is all the more expected as the *élan* is a manifestation of duration and is, for that reason, endowed with the virtue of continuity, even when engaged in divergent lines of evolution.

The concepts of divergence and complementarity reiterate the need to distinguish between life as virtual reality and living beings as actualized forms of life. However, it is important to keep in mind that the distinction is not one of separation. Life is not an entity by itself existing outside living beings. Nor does it exist as detached or fragmented pieces in each direction or each living being. On the contrary, each living being contains the whole of life but only virtually, its actual form representing what has been actualized thanks to the organization of matter. No surprise here since we have said that, unlike material objects that result from artificial cuts of the continuity of materiality, living beings are real individualities closed off by nature. Their actualization is precisely how they are insulated by nature. We also noted that the real concrete is a unity of indistinct multiplicity, as opposed to abstract and false concrete things, which are devoid of plurality and unity, respectively. To say that each living being actualizes life is to say that life is not a generality, what

all living beings have in common without, however, identifying with any of the living beings. On the other hand, the real is not simply each living being, which would turn life into a mere heading. The correct conception is life as an undivided unity enclosing the indefinite variety of living beings. Though each form of life does represent an arrested form, there is no opposition between life and the arrested form, as Canguilhem suggests, because the virtuality inherent in each living being allows continuous differentiation both in the form of reproduction and divergent evolution. In other words, one must go beyond the reduction of life to living beings as well as the conception of life as a metaphysical notion distinct from the living. As differentiation, each living being takes part in the undivided unity of life, like white light is wholly present in each of the differentiated color of the spectrum.

Once we rule out the explanation of the appearance of complex forms on divergent lines of evolution by local and accidental events, what else remains but the postulation of an overarching endeavor advancing by means of local realizations, each of which constitutes a differentiation of the same continuity? If life is a single and indivisible élan that ramifies, the distinction between life and living beings is not one of separation, but one of continuity of progress via living beings. It is also understandable that structurally similar organs are conserved in the ramification process, in the same way as long-separated friends preserve the same memories. It follows that life never starts from zero since what is realized each time and on each line belongs to a common source that is immanent in the process. This initiates a cumulative process but that is not unilinear because life does not create new forms of life by adding elements on previous ones. As Bergson says, “*life does not proceed by the association and addition of elements, but by dissociation and division.*”⁷⁸ Life’s unity being indivisible does not result in some forms of life having more or less than other forms of life. Instead, it proceeds by divisions actualizing certain functions on divergent lines while the rest remains virtual or non-actualized.

Let us insist on the methods of life because it shows the major difference between Bergson’s idea of evolution and what is known as evolutionism. In characterizing evolution as creative, Bergson definitively turns his back on the understanding of evolution as a unilinear and gradual process. For him, says Arnaud François, “evolution is not gradual—from lower to higher—but proceeds, on the contrary, with a series of differences of nature.”⁷⁹ The point is that a gradual conception

from the lower to the higher is obtained by means of additions, with the consequence that both the lower and the higher belong to the same line of evolution and that their difference is quantitative, with the higher having more than the lower. Moreover, such a conception of evolution is prone to establish a ranking order since the realizations are stages of the same stuff evolving from inferior to superior states, for instance, developing from the vegetal to the human state via the stage of animality. Accordingly, the animal is just the previous, that is, the inferior, archaic stage of the human. Different is Bergson's view of evolution. Instead of juxtaposing stages in a linear form of history, he considers life as tendency, whose essence "is to develop in the form of a sheaf, creating, by its very growth, divergent directions among which its impetus is divided."⁸⁰

For Bergson, evolution by addition misses the creative nature of life. Forms of life did not appear by the mechanical additions of elements on previous forms of life; they are creations by means of dissociation. Unlike a gradual and cumulative process, dissociation has to invent, since it does not simply add something on what is already there but diverges, that is, generates new forms. This divergent conception restates the distance separating Bergson from dialectical thinking. In the Hegelian system of stage producing stage progression, the previous stage is deficient in relation to the coming stage. Consequently, the process is one of completion, of achieving progressively adequate forms of the same entity. Because progression is about removing inadequacies, and not differentiating, what is achieved at any moment becomes a negative to what is in gestation. Thus, speaking of the development of a plant, Hegel writes:

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible.⁸¹

Conceived as a series of negation, the process removes inadequacies, perfects the same seed but does not generate novelties. Not so with Bergson: the process is fully creative because it dissociates from what is achieved instead of amending it, thereby generating, not the same as improved, but the different of the same. Where dialectics see stages,

Bergson reads differentiations, an outcome that is, in fact, in line with the way duration operates, namely, the generation of novelty through the prolongation of the past into the present.

In ranking forms of life on a linear process, the gradualist conception overlooks the complementarity of forms of life. It is pointless to rank forms of life as superior and inferior, not only because what is considered as inferior is the very condition that made possible and sustains what is termed as superior, but also because what is viewed as superior comes about through forfeiting functions actualized on divergent lines. The term “superior” indicates less an all-round perfecting than what we value from a certain perspective. With the idea of divergent evolution, Bergson shows a remarkable convergence with modern ecology. Echoing in advance its central concept, namely, the idea of ecological solidarity and sustainability (about which more is said in Chapter 7), he writes:

as the smallest grain of dust is bound up with our entire solar system ... so all organized beings, from the humblest to the highest, ... do but evidence a single impulsion All the living hold together, and all yield to the same tremendous push. The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality.⁸²

That life adopts the method of divergence only strengthens the notion of effort by underscoring the importance of the idea of the finitude of the vital *élan*. Indeed, not only does the effort encounter obstacles, but it is also not all-powerful since, unable to continue further, it is compelled to take various detours. There is no effort without obstacles, but there is no effort without finitude, either, because an all-powerful or infinite force need not exert effort, just as it knows no obstacle. And as we already know, the obstacles are so many ways of forcing the *élan* of life to take a new direction, not so much to remove the obstacles, which is impossible, but to compose with matter, to use the very laws of matter to circumvent the obstacles, in a word, to be creative. It is this same creativity that human consciousness inherits, notably by adopting the form of intelligence in its dealings with matter.

Given the importance of the notion of finitude, a study of the relation of life to matter would not be complete without clarifying the puzzle that the notion invites. Indeed, what else does such a notion prompt but the question of knowing how Bergson avoids what seems inevitable, to wit, a materialist credo? In declaring the *élan* a finite force, Bergson

is not only excluding a definitive victory of life over materiality, but he is also reiterating the inseparable unity of life and matter. What makes the *élan* finite is none other than its oneness with materiality, being but the unsuccessful attempt to inverse it. Dualistic extensions would have been possible if ascent and descent, life and matter were separable. We saw that such a dualistic and oppositional distinction is a view from outside: grasped in its internal unity, reality is one as self-effort or as slanted phenomenon. Clearly, the answer to the question of the compatibility of the finitude of the *élan* with Bergson's spiritualist stand requires that we dig deeper into the unity between life and matter.

ENDURING STRIVING IN LIEU OF THE ETERNAL

Doubtless, nothing is more unfamiliar than for a spiritualist philosophy defending the autonomy of the mind from materiality to insist so strongly on the inseparable unity between life and matter. True, unlike traditional dualism, Bergson adopts an immanent approach according to which consciousness, first entirely submerged in materiality, progressively emerges and manifests itself. But it is equally true that he reaches conclusions that converge with dualism. Witness his theory of the independence of memory from the brain in *Matter and Memory* (see Chapter 6), and the definition of life as "an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles, perhaps even death" in *Creative Evolution*.⁸³ What could be more contrary to the idea of inseparability of matter and life than to assume the possibility of life without matter? Either my interpretation emphasizing the unity of matter and life in Bergsonism is wrong, with the consequence that it should be replaced with a dualistic approach, or the inseparability must be transcended as a fallout of the phenomenon of life as overcoming itself. Indeed, does not the notion of a self-surpassing phenomenon contain the suggestion that no final limit can be assigned to life?

Granted that self-overcoming posits by essence limitation, it is also obvious that it would not be self-overcoming if it were not the perpetual effort to overcome its limitations. It follows that no end can be attributed to life without abandoning the notion of an enduring, striving Being. Life as an open-ended phenomenon incorporates the possibility of a continuous metamorphosis of life in ways that defy our usual conceptions. This is exactly what Miquel misses when, overlooking this open-ended nature of life, he questions the possibility of life without matter.

According to him, Bergson's established immanence of life to matter, to the extent that it is responsible for making life into "a force of exceedance," precludes any idea that life "could one day liberate itself from matter."⁸⁴ If, as already argued, life is what is being made on what is being unmade, it makes no sense to say that the one part preserves itself without the other. For Miquel, overcoming must be understood, not as emancipation, but as life's perpetual inadequacy vis-à-vis its accomplishments. Similarly, we saw that Merleau-Ponty speaks of inconsistency each time Bergson comes back to dualism after developing a monistic view of reality. The general tendency among many critics is to characterize as inconsistency Bergson's attempt to draw dualistic inferences from monistic premises.

The problem with the alleged inconsistency is that Bergson does not start with dualism, with the distinction and opposition between matter and mind. Instead, he dissolves dualism into the unity of Being and shows how progressively the original unity duplicates itself in higher and higher forms of life. There is no emancipation in the sense of duality, but a series of metamorphoses, of qualitative changes representing various degrees of condensation of the same Being. Bergson's dualism, if one wishes to retain the term, is not so much distinction and separation as condensation of the same Being ranging from materiality to spirit via organic life, all representing various degrees of tension. Life is a higher degree of the condensation of matter, just as spirit is a higher condensation of life. There is no dualism in the sense of separate being, but a passage from one level of condensation to a higher one. Once the existence of two substances is discarded, it is no longer about spirit existing without matter; rather, it is matter changing first into living beings and then mutating into spirit. For instance, *Matter and Memory* shows that the repetitive and extremely rapid vibrations of matter change in intensity and become sensations in the act of perception. Sensations are not in the brain or in the subjective mind; they are where they happen, the only difference being that they are subjected to a higher level of condensation. This idea that the same Being can be qualitatively differentiated opens the possibility of some dualistic extensions, since differentiation creates new possibilities as it reaches higher levels of condensation.

What the extensions mean is that, once life is defined as a striving, self-surpassing phenomenon, there is no definitive limit that we can assign to it without going against the definition. If one truly thinks that life is driven by the need to overcome itself, to go beyond limitations,

then it is contradictory to assign a final terminus to life, whatever that terminus may be. To assign a final limit is to block the process of life by an absolute negative and whose consequence is that life itself becomes a vain struggle against the forces of death. Such an absolute limit would change life, in the words of Sartre, into a “useless passion.”⁸⁵ No other term but absurdity defines an effort that wrestles against an invincible opponent. We transcend negativity if we say that life has limitations, but ones that are not labeled insurmountable in advance. Such limitations provoke effort because they are meant to be overcome.

The other crucially important implication of the finiteness of the *élan* is that, as already mentioned, it allows Bergson to avoid pantheism. We know that monism, when it acknowledges the existence of God, can hardly escape pantheistic conclusions and, unsurprisingly, Bergson has been accused of precisely falling into the same error, notably by a Belgian Jesuit, Father de Tonquédec. In one of his replies to him, Bergson maintains that God created the world in the sense of being “the source,” but that He remains “distinct” from it.⁸⁶ Just as the source of a river must not be confused with the main river with its meanders and its mouth, so too God is separate from the world. As already argued, what makes the distinction thinkable is none other than the finiteness of the *élan*. Clearly, it is impossible to imagine that the *élan* would be distinct from God while being itself infinite. What would be the basis of the distinction if the *élan* is as infinite as God, not to mention the fact that infiniteness would sever life from materiality? By contrast, finiteness guarantees the autonomy of the *élan*, its ability to work, to be creative on its own. That is why the *élan* is not God’s self-assertion but the act of creating creators: God is the source, not the end purpose of evolution. In the Hegelian dialectics, for instance, the world and its development represent God’s becoming, for “of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is.”⁸⁷ In the case of Bergson, however, duration is not self-assertion via negation. As we saw, duration is differentiation; it does not arrive at the same developed, but at the other of the same. Accordingly, we must visualize the appearance of the world as a fallout of God’s superabundant activity. Bergson uses the image of a steam in a vessel at high pressure escaping in a jet from a crack and condensing into little drops while “a small part of the jet of steam subsists, uncondensed, for some seconds; it is making an effort to raise the drops which are falling.”⁸⁸ The image presents the world as a detached outcome of God’s activity endeavoring to inverse

the detachment in an autonomous way, a little like a rider left behind in a bicycle race strives to join the peloton.

Accordingly, we return to the initial principle: to think being without non-being is to conceive the notion of self-producing, self-generating reality. For such a conception, being does not unfold; instead, there is creation of being. As discussed in the previous chapter, the present is not what passes; the present is what endures, prolongs itself, a phenomenon that Bergson illustrates by the image of duration “rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow.”⁸⁹ In this rolling process, there is no place for nothingness: movement and change do not fill gaps or realize what is potential or possible. Everything is full and whatever happens results from creation, which denotes self-expansion rather than the filling of a gap. Since what is accomplished was neither possible nor caused by a lack, preexistence in the form of possible or lack is just a retrograde view, which blocks the understanding that there is creation of being. To think in duration is to think creation of being. As such, the thinking expels nothingness because it excludes discontinuity and juxtaposition in favor of continuity. Where there is continuity there is fullness whose movement and change can only be its own continuous metamorphosis. Such a creative Being has no term but only provisional stoppages.

The alleged Bergsonian inconsistencies appear when one attributes a dualistic language to Bergson. In the dualistic perspective, consciousness or the soul (no matter the word) is supposed to detach itself from its material vestment or the body. But, if instead of detachment or emancipation, we think in terms of ontological metamorphosis, of transition from one mode of being to another qualitatively different mode of being, the inconsistencies disappear. Rather than dualism of substance, we have different levels of the continuity linking matter, organic life, and conscious life. The passage from one form of being to another is not effected by means of negation, but through creative continuity. Open and striving Being means not only continuous novelty but also no absolute limit or terminus. Note in passing that a convergence between Kant and Bergson appears on the question of immortality: just as Kant posits a “progression proceeding *ad infinitum*” as a necessary postulate for the pursuit of moral perfection, the Bergsonian notion of self-creation requires a continuity of change that is unending.⁹⁰

Such a triumphant philosophy of life may look out of touch with the reality of human sufferings. Indeed, the suggestion that nothingness and negation have no objective significance appears disconcerting

in that it seems to refuse any reality to what is missing, failing, and dying. According to Jean Hyppolite, one of the reasons for the decline of Bergsonism and the subsequent rise of existentialist philosophy, is the inopportune “serenity” of Bergson.⁹¹ A philosophy that has no place for nothingness and the negative, a philosophy that sees no holes but only plenitude and positivity, is not only “optimistic, like Leibnitz’s sage, but first and above all joyous” and, as such, out of touch with the gruesome reality of the world.⁹² Here again, the right approach is to avoid one-sided characterization by saying that Bergson ignores the tragedies of life and the reality of human griefs. Instead, one must refer to the distinction between the ontological and the psychological levels, which distinction shows that the same reality can be taken in two different senses, a little in the Kantian manner. Moreover, concerning death, we saw that Bergson does not exclude the possibility of its defeat. However, he also maintains that “everything is *as if* this death had been willed, or at least accepted, for the greater progress of life in general.”⁹³ These two statements are not contradictory. The continuity of progress can implicate the defeat of death, just as the indefinite continuity of the organic form of life would hamper progress without the generational renewal of life. Needless to say, these considerations do not provide consolation for the dying individuals and their loved ones. The suffering is real and knowledge does not make it go away, any more than the understanding of the physiology of physical pain reduces the sensation of pain. The denial of the objective reach of the negative does not in any way erase the reality of the subjective.

Where Bergson differs from existentialism is not so much in the denial of suffering as in his conviction that negative relations, such as anxiety, suffering, distress, and death, do not reveal being. What reveals being is the positive feeling of joy because joy results from accomplishment, from advancing the creative purpose of life. Unlike pleasure, which reports the satisfaction of needs, “joy always announces that life has succeeded, gained ground, conquered. All great joy has a triumphant note.”⁹⁴ In a word, joy reveals the essence of life as self-overcoming. The being that lacks being, the being that is full of holes is the desiring being vainly chasing after its own completion. By contrast, the being that is full creates, not out of lack, but out of plenitude. It is then self-surpassing, going over limits. As such, it is beyond the useful and the pleasant and reaches the realm of joy, that is, of life sporting with itself. In this way, Bergson attains a vision of life that is somewhat Nietzschean but stripped of Nietzsche’s anathema on spirituality and his manifesto on God’s death.

NOTES

1. Parmenides, "The Eleatic School," in *The Presocratics*, ed. Philip Wheelwright (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1966), 97.
2. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 260.
3. *Ibid.*, 290.
4. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), 300.
5. *Ibid.*, 301.
6. Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 64.
7. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 303.
8. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), 161.
9. *Ibid.*, 308 (italics in text).
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 84.
11. Florence Caeymaex, "Négativité et finitude de l'élan vital. La lecture de Bergson par Jankélévitch," in *Annales bergsoniennes IV*, eds. Frédéric Worms, Arnaud François, and Vincent Guillin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 631 (my translation).
12. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 172 (italics in text).
13. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 28.
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 70.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 84.
17. Sarah Richmond, "Sartre and Bergson: A Disagreement About Nothingness," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15, no. 1 (2007): 87.
18. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugu Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 18.
19. Caeymaex, "Negativity et finitude de l'élan vital," 633 (my translation).
20. I keep the French term because its English translation, often as "vital impetus," is not fully adequate. As Tomlinson and Habberjam remarks, "the French word 'élan' has a much broader range of sense than the English 'impetus,' from 'momentum,' through 'surge' to 'vigor,'" *Bergsonism*, 9.
21. Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 52.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 63.

24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 109.
27. Ibid., 270 (italics in text).
28. Paul-Antoine Miquel, "Bergson et Darwin," in *Bergson: La durée et la nature*, ed. Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 129 (my translation).
29. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 290.
30. Miquel, "Bergson et Darwin," 132 (my translation).
31. Yala Kisukidi, "Néant, négation, négativité dans L'Évolution créatrice de Bergson," in *Annales bergsoniennes IV*, 408 (my translation).
32. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, trans. Nils F. Schott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 144 (italics in the text).
33. Caeymaex, "Négativité et finitude de l'élan vital," 636 (my translation).
34. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, 183.
35. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 277.
36. Ibid., 272.
37. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, 141 (italics in the text).
38. Ibid., 184.
39. Ibid., 139.
40. Ibid., 140.
41. Ibid., 142.
42. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 268 (italics in the text).
43. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 78.
44. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 290 (italics in the text).
45. Ibid., 278.
46. See, *ibid.*, 276.
47. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 21.
48. Ibid., 20.
49. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 156.
50. Ibid., 270 (italics in the text).
51. Bergson, "Life and Consciousness," in *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henri Holt and Company, 1920), 29.
52. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, 144.
53. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 109–10.
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55. Ebénézer Njoh Mouelle, *Henri Bergson et l'idée de dépassement de la condition humaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), 205 (my translation).
56. Dimitri Tellier, *La métaphysique bergsonienne de l'intériorité: Se créer ou se perdre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), 79 (my translation).
57. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 14 (italics in text).

58. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 548.
59. Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 62.
60. Ibid.
61. Renaud Barbaras, “le problème de l’expérience,” in *Annales bergsoniennes II: Bergson, Deleuze, la phénoménologie*, ed. Frédéric Worms (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 302 (my translation).
62. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 268.
63. Ibid., 15.
64. Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Bergson’s Encounter with Biology,” *Angelaki* 10, no. 2 (2005): 66.
65. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 61.
66. Ibid., 99.
67. Ibid., 103.
68. Ibid., 104 (italics in text).
69. More will be said on this in the next chapter.
70. James DiFrisco, “Élan Vital Revisited: Bergson and the Thermodynamic Paradigm,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53, no. 1 (2015): 56.
71. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 106.
72. Renaud Barbaras, “The Failure of Bergsonism,” in *Bergson and Phenomenology*, ed. Michael R. Kelly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 261.
73. Guillaume Le Blanc, “Le problème de la création: Bergson et Canguilhem,” in *Annales bergsoniennes II*, 495 (my translation). In the article, the author analyzes the similitudes and the divergences between Bergson and Georges Canguilhem.
74. Georges Canguilhem, «Le concept et la vie», *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 34, no. 82 (1966): 197 (my translation).
75. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 32 (italics in text).
76. Ibid., 30–31.
77. Ibid., 62.
78. Ibid., 99 (italics in text).
79. Arnaud François, “Ce que Bergson entend par «monisme». Bergson et Haeckel,” in *Lire Bergson*, eds. Frédéric Worms and Camille Riquier (Paris: PUF, 2011), 133 (my translation).
80. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 110.
81. G. W. F. Hegel, “Preface,” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2.
82. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 295.
83. Ibid.
84. Miquel, “Bergson et Darwin,” 132 (my translation).
85. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 784.

86. Henri Bergson, *Mélanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 766 (my translation).
87. Hegel, "Preface," 11 (*italics in text*).
88. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 270.
89. *Ibid.*, 4.
90. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 122.
91. Jean Hyppolite, *Figures de la pensée philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), 490 (my translation).
92. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, 179.
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CHAPTER 5

Perception and the Genesis of the Subject

What turns perception into a thorny philosophical issue is the widely shared approach that to perceive is to be aware of a mental content given in the brain or the mind. Despite antagonistic philosophical positions, materialist and dualist thinkers see representation as a mental duplicate of an external reality, which duplicate is just a psychological translation of the effects of the material causality of external things on the brain. By contrast, arguing that we know only what is given in the mind, idealism retorts that the alleged existence of an external reality is a gratuitous affirmation, so that nothing else exists but the thinking mind and its ideas. Whatever additional arguments are added to support each theory, the impasse cannot be broken. This is because there is no way to prove that anything external to what is effectively perceived in the mind exists, any more than one can dismiss the belief that what is in mind is caused by something independent of the perceiver's will. Clearly, we have here a typical example of what Bergson calls a badly stated problem. This chapter examines how the Bergsonian understanding of perception in terms of selection and limitation rather than the formation of a mental replica of things reformulates the problem with the view of solving the impasse.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF REPRESENTATIONAL THEORIES OF PERCEPTION

My perception of objects presents the characteristics of being external, extended, and qualitatively differentiated. At the same time, I understand that what I call external objects is just a set of ideas in my mind. However, I also see a distinct difference between perception and what I call imagination and memory. Unlike the latter, objects of perception do not depend on my will. I conclude that perceptions are caused by objects that are external to my mind. In other words, perceptions are representations, that is, internal, subjective replicas of external objects.

The representational theory finds its most influential advocate in the scientific explanation of perception. According to neuroscience, there is no direct contact between objects and the perceiver. Instead, the influences of objects first reach the sense organs, which transmit them to the brain where they undergo complex electrochemical processes. These processes result in the formation of internal images that are subsequently interpreted as representations of external objects. The explanation suggests an analogy between perception and how a camera works. Just as a camera captures the beams of light bouncing off objects and develops them into photographs of objects, so too the brain transforms the influences that it receives into internal duplicates of objects.

Now I call my perceptions real or true if objects external to me indeed exist and resemble my perceptions. Yet, it is also obvious that I cannot go outside of my mind or my ideas to verify the existence of external objects and their conformity to my perceptions. Therefore, the grounds for calling my perceptions real become unsupported. How do I establish resemblance given the generally accepted radical distinction between a mental state and a material object? In contrast to material objects, I define the mind by the characteristics of being unextended, indivisible, and internal to itself. How then can the contents of the mind resemble material objects, which are extended, juxtaposed alongside one another, and divisible? Moreover, how can I verify the existence of external objects and their conformity to my perceptions if only ideas are given to me?

From these perplexing questions, the idealist thinker draws the conclusion that the path of consistency is to maintain that the world is nothing but my own representation. George Berkeley, an authoritative proponent of the idealist position, finds the belief that objects exist

independently of the perceptions that we have of them contradictory. He asks: "What are the fore-mentioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these, or any combination of them, should exist unperceived?"¹ Consistency does not shield the idealist position from being utterly untenable. True, the idealist assumption explains why perception is a centered system in which things vary according to the movements of the perceiving subject. All the same, the explanation cannot deny that, though the subject occupies the center, the things that surround it are governed by laws independent of the will of the perceiver. This recognition forces the idealist "to abandon this central position, to replace all the images on the same plane, to suppose that they no longer vary for him, but for themselves."² Such an admission turns idealism into realism, that is, into a defense of the belief that reality exists independently of the perceiver. But given that idealists cannot have recourse to the concept of matter to establish the independence of perceived objects, they have to appeal to some *deus ex machina*. In effect, to explain the permanence and regularity of his perceptions, Berkeley could find no other solution than to pinpoint God as the direct cause of his ideas and His benevolence as the reason for their ordered course.

Though unlike idealists, realists admit the independent existence of things, their theory of perception is no less contradictory. Since realists are convinced that perception is representation, they feel compelled to clearly separate the subjective from the objective, that is, what appears in the mind from what is external to the mind. This way of positing the problem contains the quagmire in which realists find themselves. To them the real is the world where things are governed by objective laws, and the centered and variable system of perception cannot be anything other than appearance. On the other hand, realists concede that only the world of perception is given so that the real world—the world behind our perceptions—is either posited by means of arbitrary "metaphysical construction" or is declared "unknowable" in the manner of Kant or Hume.³ An instance of metaphysical construction is Descartes's argument that perceptions, despite their subjective nature and provided they are distinct and clear, can be said to correspond to material objects because God is not "a deceiver."⁴ What is more, the purification of perception from all that is exclusively subjective results in the reduction of material objects to pure extension, and this reduction has nothing to do with the qualitative nature of my perception.

It must not be made to seem that the materialist version of realism is in a better shape in its dealing with the existence of a material world. Insofar as the materialist credo reduces the real to materiality, its theory of perception entirely rests on a substitution: what for dualists is the distinct function of a spiritual agent is passed on to the brain—a material object among other material objects—which is then endowed with the occult and unknowable power of “engendering representations.”⁵ Moreover, because it is said that, instead of the mind, the brain produces the representation of objects, the problem is nowhere near to being solved. Perception still remains drowned in subjectivism and, just as the idealist, the materialist ends up with the affirmation that the world is nothing but his/her representation.

The major contradiction of dualistic and materialist representational theories of perception is that their conclusion leans toward the idealist standpoint despite their initial rejection of it. As to idealism, it refuses the point of departure of realism but only to move toward it as soon as it wants to explain why perceived things are independent of the will of the perceiver. The source of these contradictions is found in the stubborn idea of lodging perception in the subject, be it in the brain or in the mind, thereby locking up perception in an insurmountable subjectivism. The consequence is that the existence of an independent world and the confidence that things look like the perceptions we have of them turn into intractable problems. In truth, the predicaments of representational theories should not come as a surprise. The idea of engendering the representation of the external world, not from the world itself but from the brain or the mind of the perceiver, seriously muddles the notion of externality from the get-go. If the representation of an object is in the brain or the mind, then the externality of the object can be established only by unconvincing intellectual artifices.

Since the contradictions of realist and idealist theories of perception show that the attempt to deduce the objective system of matter from the centered system of perception or vice versa is at an impasse, Bergson invites us to admit that “each of them is sufficient to itself.”⁶ So posited, the problem of perception is no longer how internal representations reproduce the objective world. Rather, it is to explain how the same objects can belong to two different systems: (1) the objective system where things are given as external to one another and are governed by objective laws, thereby forming an independent world; and (2) the system of

perception in which the same objects exist for and vary according to the perceiving subject.

The same objects can belong to two different systems only if the centered system, instead of being a copy, a transmutation of the material into a mental duplicate (realism) or an absolute excluding the unperceived (idealism), is just a limitation of the uncentered and objective system. Such an approach does no more than reject all representational theories of perception in favor of a theory attributing the system of perception to a selective act. The immediate implication of this theory is that there is no difference in kind between perceived things and things in themselves. While all representational theories cannot avoid opposing appearance to reality, for Bergson, perceived things are not subjective entities, but selected things, that is, things turned toward us instead of being turned toward each other. The difference between perception and reality is not one of appearance versus reality, but simply one of part and whole.

What could the function of the centered system be as opposed to the uncentered system? When we contrast the system of matter where objects act and react in a necessary way with the centered system of perception where things vary in relation to a central object, both the variation and the selected nature of the centered system suggest that its purpose is to allow actions emanating from the center. In the system of matter, to the extent that actions and reactions are automatic, a centered system is utterly superfluous owing to the absence of autonomous reactions. The appearance of a centered and selected system presupposes, therefore, withholding automatism in favor of objects displaying themselves for an autonomous agent.

FROM THE MATERIAL TO THE PSYCHIC

Before going into a detailed analysis, the best way to begin studying the Bergsonian theory of perception is to first ground it in the metaphysical premises laid out in the previous chapter. Not only did the last chapter establish that life is action on matter, but it also developed a monistic view according to which the action is none other than an attempt to inverse the descending trend of materiality, itself derived from a prior act of *détente*. It added that the inability to inverse the descending trend left life as effort or *élan* that nevertheless succeeded in carving living organisms. In default of being able to inverse the whole, life “strove to

constitute systems naturally isolated, naturally closed,” with the crucial consequence that the descending trend became an externally distinct reality on which living organisms depend.⁷ Indeed, because the living organism is an extract from the larger system to which it structurally belongs, it cannot be self-sufficient, notably it cannot produce the energy that it needs to sustain itself. The reason is simple: since whatever is material is in a state of dissipation, of descent and that the dissipating movement cannot be inversed from inside, the closed mini-system must somehow take energy from the larger system to be able to act. This action takes up the initial effort to inverse the descending tendency, but in a much more subdued way. The use of energy provided externally obviously requires two steps: the storage of that energy and its appropriation in a way usable by cloistered subsystems. This is exactly what the split of life between plants and animals achieves. Plants store up solar energy that animals use as food for mobility in space and sustenance of the living body. Hence Bergson’s definition of the developed type of animal as

a sensory-motor nervous system imposed on digestive, respiratory, circulatory systems, etc. The function of these latter is to cleanse, repair and protect the nervous system, to make it as independent as possible of external circumstances, but, above all, to furnish it with energy to be expended in movements.⁸

The fact that the autonomy of the animal is conquered and must be constantly renewed posits functions enabling the animal to detect and appropriate those things that it needs as well as avoid those things that are harmful to its integrity. The conditions for the sustenance of the living organism, namely, appropriation and avoidance, derive from the separation from the whole, whose solution is the possibility of mobility in space. Still, mobility cannot be a solution unless it is conjoined with the ability to detect in advance what needs to be appropriated or avoided. What else are seeing, smelling, hearing, touching, and tasting but functions of detection? In other words, the dependence of the closed mini-system on the larger system posits mobility and perception as the *sine qua non* of survival. Evidently, the most efficient and promising way for a naturally closed but dependent system to act externally is to have the conscious representation of the surrounding area. But conscious relations depend on one condition: to detect and fetch the things that

it needs, the relations of the closed system with the environment must be different from the determined connection between material objects. Where actions and reactions are automatic and immediate, the need and the possibility of conscious relations are absent. However, actions and reactions would cease to be mechanical if the closed system would withhold or delay its reactions to some of the influences reaching it. In this case, while the rest remains unconscious, the influences that fail to trigger automatic reactions would become so many questions, thereby engendering a relation of indetermination with the living body. This is exactly the role that Bergson assigns to the brain, which role, be it noted, fulfills on a smaller scale life's original tendency to retard the automatism of matter in default of being able to inverse it. Without yet analyzing the mechanism involved, we can already say that the act suspending automatic responses to the influences is also the act by which the influences are made to appear. If the relations between the influences and the living being do not cause automatic responses while still being active, the explanation is that the influences are converted into mere presences, somewhat like what would happen if a flashlight operates a volte-face and illuminates itself instead of lightening up the surroundings.

The actualization of conscious relations corresponds to the act of distancing. It is how I perceive things in advance, that is, before their influences instigate automatic reactions on my part. Distancing thus materializes the possibility of acting externally on matter by the medium of a closed system. How else but through distancing can an autonomous action be introduced in what constitutes a compact, interacting, and moving reality? Withholding reactions to specific influences inserts a pause into the automatism of actions and reactions, thereby actualizing the possibility of selected responses. Since the things that I perceive are the ones involving postponed reactions, where I grasp them in terms of space measures my gain in terms of time. In deferring my reactions, I give myself time, and this is exactly indicated by the spatial representations of things. Delaying my reactions means disposing of time, which, in turn, means distancing, generating a spatial, an ideal relation with things instead of the determined connection governing materiality. As Bergson puts it, "*perception is master of space in the exact measure in which action is master of time.*"⁹ In short, understood in depth, the source of spatialization is temporalization, even though its outcome is the juxtaposition of temporal continuity precisely for the sake of action.

In posing the problem of perception in terms of received influences and delayed reactions, Bergson invalidates the view that perception is about generating a mental picture. The definition of life as an inversion of materiality suggests that life and with it consciousness are coextensive with reality. In such a reality, everything is present to everything else, but only in principle, since in addition to being diffused, consciousness is constantly annulled by the automatism governing the actions and reactions of material objects. It follows that the ability to delay automatism by means of closed systems both condenses and liberates consciousness. In other words, consciousness appears, not because some divine act or some mechanism creates it out of nothing, but because it acquires intensity and focus as a result of limitation effected by the closed subsystem. By separating the living organism from the whole, limitation both intensifies consciousness and endows it with spontaneity and motivation by the medium of needs. A word of caution: spontaneity and motivation do not yet imply the presence of a subject; they just signify the manifestation of a living center of activity. As explained in the next chapter, the input of memory is necessary to raise vital activity to the level of personhood.

To pose the problem of perception in terms of limitation rather than the formation of mental pictures avoids explaining perception by attributing occult powers to the brain and sense organs. Granted we see with the eye, however, the main question is whether the eye is what sees, whether it is what transforms light into sight. As A. A. Luce reminds us, "the eye forms images. So does a camera; yet we do not credit the camera with the power of seeing the images it has made."¹⁰ If we push the difficulty further by saying that the brain is responsible for such a transformation, other than increased complexity and movements, we find nothing remotely liable to generate something resembling a psychic phenomenon. When the alleged cause is supposed to produce a completely different ontological effect, it is impossible to avoid the impression that the said cause and effect are linked by a magic wand. We avoid the recourse to magic if, instead of speaking of the generation of the psychic, we see only an actualization by limitation, where limitation leads to the intensification of a diffused and dormant potentiality. As developed in the previous chapter, the intensification fits Bergson's view of reality as "an action which is making itself across an action of the same kind which is unmaking itself."¹¹ It is understandable that the same movement yields ontologically different outcomes according as the direction is one of descent, of spreading out, or of ascent imparting condensation. In light

of this view of reality, the work of the sense organs would be to select and canalize external influences while that of brain would be to momentarily bend material determinism. The selected temporary loosening of determinism actualizes and focuses consciousness. In this way, consciousness is not what is generated, but what is made operational by the conducive condition created by the brain and the sense organs. As Bento Prado notes, the goal of Bergson is not only to show that “spirit exists in embryo in nature,” but it is also “to explain how it emerges from it.”¹²

FROM PURE TO CONCRETE PERCEPTION

A major implication of the theory explaining perception by limitation is that it eliminates the need to reconstitute reality from the projection of subjective states. By rendering the projection unnecessary, limitation or the narrowing of what is spread out means that “we place ourselves in the very heart of things.”¹³ To be sure, the intricate difficulty arising from a subjectivist understanding denotes the complexity of the act of perception. The undeniable implication of subjectivity in perception is the reason why philosophers and psychologists embark on the dead-end path of reconstituting the act by means of mental images in the brain or the mind. The Bergsonian statement that perception occurs directly in the things themselves must reserve a place for the input of subjectivity, while also showing that perception is in the main an act without a subject. The concept of pure perception, in contrast to concrete perception, refers to and defines the impersonal basis on which concrete or subjectivized perception is built.

Pure perception involves perception prior to the split between subject and object. As such it avoids the original error philosophers make, which is that the reconstitution of perception from a subjective basis is unavoidable once subject and object are separated by an ontological barrier. The only way to exclude the need for the mediating mental image or copy of the object is to posit a primitive basis of indistinction between subject and object. Indistinction means a foundational, primitive state of circuit, reciprocity yielding pure presence, manifestation. We do not have yet a subject conscious of itself and possessing its own consciousness in opposition to the object. Rather, the consciousness is a shared one; it is selfless, impersonal, in short a pre-cogito consciousness offering, in the apt expression of Renaud Barbaras, “a spectacle without spectator.”¹⁴ We measure here the deep gap separating Bergsonism from the traditional

way of posing the problem of perception. For Bergson, the distinction between subject and object, no doubt crucial for the emergence of a subject, must be viewed, under pain of the mind losing any real contact with reality, as a derivation from an original state of indistinction.

In whichever way we look at the problem, subjectivism is unavoidable without the assumption of an original indistinction. For things to be perceived as they are and where they are, there is only one condition: perception must occur in the things themselves rather than consciousness revealing things. According to Gilles Deleuze, the line demarcating the traditional theory of perception, including that of phenomenology, from Bergsonism is that for the latter “all consciousness is something,” as opposed to the formula made famous by phenomenology “all consciousness is consciousness of something.”¹⁵ The phenomenological formula maintains an impassable distinction between the perceiver and the perceived; that of Bergson posits a primitive indistinction from which the subject emerges through progressive differentiation. This foundational consciousness is not aiming at; it is the thing itself, more exactly the thing revealed. As a derivation, what I call my consciousness, the one aiming at things, overhangs the impersonal consciousness but never cancels it. Besides, experience shows that the progression is from the object or the periphery to the center and not the other way around. “Psychologists who have studied infancy,” Bergson notes, “are well aware that our representation is at first impersonal. Only little by little, and as a result of experience, does it adopt our body as a periphery center and become our representation.”¹⁶ Undoubtedly, Bergson’s position breaks with the whole philosophical tradition assigning to the conscious subject the exclusive function of revealing, of drawing things out of their ontological darkness, like a flashlight illuminates objects in a dark room. For Bergson, the reverse is true: “consciousness is a luminosity which goes from the thing to the subject,” says Jean-Paul Sartre.¹⁷ In fact, in order to avoid the implied reference to a subject, Sartre’s comment is best rendered if we translate the luminosity by “analogy as self-perception of matter.”¹⁸

In the chapter discussing the intuitive method, we saw that knowledge by coincidence is obtained by the fusion of subject and object. The definition of intuitive knowledge as coincidence qualifies pure perception as an intuitive act, with the important difference that it is not knowledge but pure manifestation. The role of philosophical intuition is therefore to recover, expand, and develop into knowledge the original and

foundational contact afforded by pure perception. That philosophical intuition operates on the basis of an original contact with reality confirms that the idea of intuition as a method of philosophical knowledge emanates from the heart of the Bergsonian theory of perception.

In light of the numerous criticisms, mostly caused by misunderstandings against both intuitive knowledge and the idea of pure perception, it is safe to assume that there is more than a disagreement over philosophical concepts. The severity of the criticisms seems to indicate the presence of an obstruction preventing the mere comprehension of the Bergsonian system of thought. In point of fact, the stubborn belief in the ontological primacy of the subject, which is shared by dualism, idealism, and phenomenology, is grounded in an illusion that is very hard to avoid. The reason for the stubbornness is that the impression of going from the center or the subject to the object is “an objective and biologically founded illusion” in that it is constitutive of a center of activity.¹⁹ In terms of appearance, there is no difference as to whether things reveal themselves to the center or the center reveals them. However, it is not the same in terms of initiative: the impression of revealing makes things dependent on the activities of the center. Thanks to the impression, the appearance of things will vary with the initiatives of the center, whereas the reverse direction of revelation would stifle initiative. For example, to change the appearances of things, I just need to move instead of waiting for things to change for me. Clearly, that things appear arranged around a center of activity cannot but create the inescapable illusion that the appearance is reflected from that center. The illusion just reflects the conversion of the received influences of things into the possible influences of the center on things.

Once the issue of the primacy of the subject and the subsequent need for the mediation of the mental image are put to rest, the Bergsonian thesis becomes inevitable: “We perceive things where they are, perception puts us at once into matter, is impersonal, and coincides with the perceived object.”²⁰ Sure enough, for a conscious act as perception to put us into matter and coincide with the perceived object, the primary condition is the rejection of dualism, of the ontological separation between matter and spirit, as well as of the positions of reductionist monism, whether it is the idealistic denial of the reality of matter, or the materialist view of spirit as an epiphenomenal emanation of physicochemical processes in the brain. For dualism, there is no transition from the material to the mental, while for materialism and idealism the

question of transition is non-existent owing to the elimination of one of the terms. Yet, despite their drastic differences, all three positions place perception in the mind or the brain because they exclude the possibility of coincidence. Either coincidence is ontologically impossible, as in the case of dualism, or the material object does not exist, as is the case of idealism, or the mental is only a byproduct of the material, as materialism maintains.

Since the positions create unsolvable problems, the only way out is to opt for coincidence, precisely by forwarding the idea that “pure perception is the lowest degree of mind.”²¹ As a capacity of the mind, the coincidence that the lowest degree realizes falls short of being mere identification, given that it fully retains the power of distinction. The previous chapters have established the ability of the mind to operate on different levels of condensation; better still, they have derived materiality itself from an act of maximum détente. It follows that pure perception is none other than a reenactment of the original détente, minus the actual genesis of materiality. To grasp what pure perception exactly reveals we have to keep in mind its difference with concrete perception. As mentioned already, concrete perception involves memory, or the prolongation of one moment into the other. The result is that our perception operates in a present that has some thickness. Accordingly, to have a vision of what is the lowest degree of the mind, we have to think of a mind with suspended memory, without losing sight of the implication that such a condition amounts to enacting material behavior. In a word, the lowest degree of mind is the performance of the very essence of materiality. The reverse process of recovering memory by blending moments is how the mind rises and differentiates itself from materiality. To quote Bergson, “when we pass from pure perception to memory, we definitely abandon matter for spirit.”²²

The suspension of memory gives us a blinking vision, a vision that flashes on and off because nothing is prolonged, but instead everything constantly appears and disappears. That which does not remember cannot prolong one moment into another moment, and this constant forgetting is how it repeats itself. This “present which is always beginning again” exactly defines materiality and is expressive of a loss of tension such that the inability to blend translates into the tendency to outspread.²³ Extension is therefore how the lowest degree of duration connects fleeting moments by spreading them in default of being able to engender a continuity of fusion. Indeed, what else can a loss of tension entail but the

tendency to extend, that is, to lay out the contents that it can no longer retain in a fused mode of being?

This relaxed duration realizes matter as a continuity of numberless vibrations (see Chapter 2). The pure perception that the lowest degree of mind or duration gives is a selected vision of this same matter. Of course, my actual vision of matter is not one of countless vibrations; it consists of stable, defined, and colorful visions. However, the transition from the one to the other is also apparent, given that the stabilized and picturesque visions are the ones I obtain if I contract the vibrations. In effect, as a perceiver endowed with memory—which expresses nothing mysterious but the tension characteristic of my consciousness—I will be able to prolong each vibration into the next one, thereby forming a condensed vision or, which is the same thing, elevating pure perception to the level of a concrete perception. Thus, contraction is how I grasp “the multitudinous successive positions” captured by pure perception as “the image of a man running,” a vision that is undoubtedly suited for practical setting and interventions, such as locating the positions and measuring the speed of the runner.²⁴

To say that the involvement of memory changes pure perception into concrete perception entails far-reaching implications as it ascribes the subjectification of perception to none other than memory. Because we overlook that concrete or real perception is a mix, we fail to distinguish the contribution of memory from pure perception. One downside of this failure is that it strengthens the illusion that perception goes from center to periphery. Indeed, the fact that we recall the mental images of past perceptions feeds on the belief that the original perceptions were equally in the mind. For a mind unable to recall past images, it would be harder to put faith in the theory that perception takes place in the mind. There is more. One fundamental feature of perception is that it is given as my perception. However, in failing to make the distinction between memory and pure perception, we miss that the attribution to myself is not an original and intrinsic feature of perception. Instead, the personalization of perception is an acquired feature derived from the insertion of memory into pure perception. Consequently, it is true that the myself always accompanies perception, but only as a result of memory framing the basis of impersonal consciousness in a personalized context.

Another crucial implication of the distinction between pure and concrete perception is the invalidation of the belief shared by most schools that “*perception has a wholly speculative interest; it is pure knowledge.*”²⁵

This characterization of perception is unavoidable once one believes that to perceive is to produce ideas about things. Conceived as the representation of external objects, perception becomes a mental act delivering knowledge. This mistaken characterization directly stems from the way perception is supposed to occur. If perception is understood as an operation by which the mind creates mental duplicates of external objects, then as a mental occurrence it is bound to function as an act of cognition. By contrast, if perception is explained by a special connection between the living body and the surrounding objects, it is no longer a mental act but an outcome exclusively involving actions and reactions between material objects. In this way, perception becomes an action, albeit of a different kind compared to the usual interactions of material objects. In effect, we saw that, while the actions and reactions of material objects are strictly determined, some of the actions and reactions of the living body exhibit the possibility of choices. It is plain that where determinism prevails, the availability of choices is pointless: as the determined object “has not to choose, so neither has it any need to explore the region round about it, nor to try its hand at several merely *eventual* actions.”²⁶ Not so with the living body: the exploration of the environment for the detection and appropriation of indispensable things, as well as for the avoidance of harmful ones, is imperative for its survival.

The insertion of indetermination by which the living being perceives some of the actions of external objects as its possible actions instead of being determined by them is how the actions take on the conscious form of solicitations. The indetermination causing appearance is realized by the manner in which the brain acts and reacts to external influences. It is therefore the outcome of a special type of interactions; it is neither the miraculous byproduct of the brain nor the phantom-like intervention of a soul. In other words, the distinguishing originality of Bergsonism is that “the notions of subjectivity and objectivity are replaced by the notions of apparent determination and indetermination.”²⁷ The paradox here is that Bergson’s explanation of perception is more materialist than materialism could ever hope for, while avoiding the endowment of a material object like the brain with the mysterious power of generating representation.

The depiction of perception in terms of action rather than knowledge has two facets. In addition to clearing pure perception of any representative function by showing that it is simply the actualization of a virtuality by the impact of suspending determinism, it derives perception

from the specific action of selecting what interests us. After all, it could be objected that perceiving my possible actions on things is a form of knowledge in that I know them as my possible actions. Precisely, the whole issue is that the perception of my possible actions is not the product of knowledge; it is due to an act of selection. The fact that influences are perceived does not depend on a segregative cognition; it is subsequent to the material action of letting through actions that do not interest the living beings while retaining those that are of interest. As originating from the exclusion of what is not of interest to my action, selected aspects do not involve speculation, obvious as it is that selection is action, not knowledge. What is perceived is that which is illuminated, as opposed to the rest, which is kept in the dark. Furthermore, in addition to reflecting my eventual interests, the form of what is illuminated is shaped in accordance with the possibilities of my body. As a result of this coordination, what interests me is presented in such a way that I can act on it. Thus, the size, appearance, shape, etc., of objects change according to the movements of my body. Both the selection and its form confirm that perception is not knowledge, since what is perceived is a conveniently arranged slice of reality.

The mistake philosophers make is to interpret this dependence of perception on the perceiver as a proof of its subjective nature. In thus lodging perception in the mind, they confuse it with knowledge, and this confusion prevents them from thinking in terms of the coexistence of “two systems,” the system of perception and that of reality.²⁸ Instead, philosophers posit only one system, that of reality, whose consequence is that they have no other choice than to place the perceived in the mind as a mental copy of the real world. Yet, the difference between the two is not that the one is subjective and the other objective—with the intractable problems generated by such an impassable difference, notably concerning the reality and nature of the external world. Rather, it is a difference between the whole and a fraction of it being centered on the possible actions of the living body. Bergson speaks of two systems to underline that their difference is not expressive of an impassable distinction. Unlike the opposition between the subjective and the objective, the same thing can belong to two different systems, especially when the one system is just part of a larger system. The rejection of coexistence in favor of the derivation of the one system from the other, according as one is materialist, realist, or idealist, is thus an outcome of the position equating perception with knowledge. Why else would one lodge perception in

the mind but to assert its cognitive function, which for the idealist means the presence of ideas in the mind and for the dualist and materialist the mental duplication of reality?

MATERIALITY AND THE NOTION OF IMAGE

The road covered so far leads us to another highly disputed Bergsonian notion, namely, the notion of matter as “*the aggregate of images*.”²⁹ The use of a term usually considered proper to signify a mental duplicate as a defining property of matter can certainly be perplexing. Yet, the notion is only consequential once the subjectification of perception is set aside. To construct perception without subject is to lump together images and materiality, given that the introduction of the subject turns images into mental representations. Consequently, the bracketing of the subject makes images the given reality, thereby signifying the impersonal character of perception, the character prior to the distinction subject-object.

According to Bergson, image means “a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*, an existence placed half-way between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’.”³⁰ It is more than the idealistic notion of representation because it is also an objective existence. However, it is not quite a thing, as the realist says, because it is not something other than what is effectively perceived as image. In a word, it partakes of both as image-existence. In defining the given reality in terms of image, Bergson does no more than propose a fresh start, a start prior to the distinction between mind and matter, and hence to the controversies dividing idealism, dualism, and materialism. Without the prior postulation of the distinction between mind and matter, no philosopher would have described the world as anything but an ensemble of images. By posing images and images only, Bergson postpones the distinction and the resulting controversies, and asks us to confine ourselves to what is given. He adds that this is exactly the view of common sense. Because it is not contaminated by philosophical controversies, common sense does not regard perception with its image attributes, such as colors, sounds, forms, etc., as a subjective projection. What is perceived is objectively given, and so signifies “a self-existing image.”³¹

The paramount importance of the concept of image is to ease the transition from matter unperceived to matter perceived, without involving a pre-given subjectivity. Because it establishes “continuity ... between

our consciousness and the world," it dissolves the rigid ontological gap between the thing and its representation.³² In so doing, it ascertains that materiality is not something other than what is perceived, that it possesses no hidden attributes other than what is perceivable. As expounded in the previous chapter, the continuity between consciousness and materiality stems from the fact that materiality is just the lowest degree of duration. As such, it eliminates the traditional opposition according to which "in consciousness there would only be images—these were qualitative and without extension. In space there would only be movements—these were extended and quantitative."³³ So rigidly compartmentalized as the inside and the outside, consciousness and the world lose all ability to connect except by some magical device.

While it is true that the notion of image overcomes the traditional opposition between materiality and its representation, it is not itself trouble-free. To begin with, whereas in Chapter I of *Matter and Memory* the notion of image occupies a central place, in the last chapter its importance diminishes to the point of extinction, even though the chapter attempts to give an inner vision of materiality. This tackling of the nature of materiality without recourse to the notion of image seems to suggest that the notion is just "a provisional milestone of an elaboration" in which it is no longer included.³⁴ In effect, one cannot underline the importance of action in the first chapter of the book without reaching the conclusion that image is a notion closely harnessed to action, all the more so as the last chapter clearly pursues a vision of matter transcending the limitations of action. Hence the question whether images exclusively apply to matter as object of action or whether the notion goes beyond and covers matter even when it is unperceived. Put otherwise, the problem is to know how the perspective of action given in Chapter I of *Matter and Memory* can be reconciled with the perspective of speculation developed in Chapter 6.

All the more reason for raising the question is that the definition of matter as an aggregate of images goes against Bergson's repeated denunciations of the artificiality (see previous chapters) of distinct, fixed, and juxtaposed states, be it in the case of conscious life or materiality. The fact that perception cuts out reality into distinct and fixed objects makes action possible, but it also blurs the fundamental continuity of matter. To the extent that the viewpoint of speculation requires the dissolution of the artificial cuts, it seems inconsistent to identify the notion of image with materiality. After all, perceived images are defined by their fixity,

distinct forms, and juxtaposition in space. Moreover, perception is not only selection resulting in the fragmentation of matter into distinct and juxtaposed objects, it also involves memory, that is, the condensation of the vibrations of matter without which there would not be any protruding and fixed image. If one removes the center of action effecting the condensation, does it not entail the dissolution of images? How could it be otherwise, since the dissolution of the center of action amounts to a loss of tension by which objects becomes less distinct, and so less pictorial? In losing tension, they increasingly become less images and finally dissolve into rapid and repetitive vibrations on the spot. This fallout is how distinct images melt into the continuity of matter, which Bergson assimilates to a consciousness “in which everything compensates and neutralizes everything else, a consciousness of which all the potential parts, balancing each other by a reaction which is always equal to the action, reciprocally hinder each other from standing out.”³⁵

Now place here and there in this neutralized continuity living beings: they select and fix their possible actions. In other words, in this interacting continuity of vibrations, “quasi-instantaneous views will be taken, views which this time are bound to be pictorial, and of which the more vivid colors will condense an infinity of elementary repetitions and changes.”³⁶ Note that the expression “this time [the views] are bound to be pictorial” indicates a transformation. That which is not pictorial become so by the condensing power of the living beings, and whose result is the drastic shortening into an immediate and pictorial view of an interminable history. We have already indicated that the intuitive knowledge of matter is an expansion of pure perception, that is, of perception without memory. Insofar as such a perception represents the lowest degree of duration, it grasps materiality as a present which is always beginning. It springs to mind that this intuitive vision is far removed from that of common sense, which echoes the perspective of action. Since pure perception is closer to reality and operates without memory, is it then consistent to retain image as a defining attribute of matter while admitting that memory is responsible for the pictorial appearance of matter?

The problem here is that authorized commentators of Bergson, including Deleuze and Nicolas Cornibert, argue for the validity of the notion of image in speculative terms. For Cornibert, far from being dropped, the notion of image is further developed in Chapter IV in the direction of “several meanings, depending on the degree of contraction

for consciousness.”³⁷ On one end, there is the image-thing, which is the product of the act of fixing and slicing proper to perception and, on the other, there is the “image-time” or movement, which is the restoration of image to its proper rhythm and hence of materiality to its essence.³⁸ The argument of the author is that, since image is associated with the contraction of duration and materiality itself is an act of duration, the intensity of contraction does not determine the appearance or not of image. Image always manifests the qualitative content of duration, no matter the degree of contraction. In the case of materiality, though highly diluted in an enormously less condensed duration, the qualitative content does not thereby vanish. Agreed, but what is not clear is how where nothing is selected and stands out the term image can still be used. Isn’t the specific function of a living being to make appear what otherwise fails to appear? Outside the living being, what we have is an interconnected reality that markedly remains flat because the interconnection blocks distinction and appearance. None of the content makes it to the level of image because nothing is distinct, and nothing escapes the unmaking trend of materiality, the only exception being the living organism.

The same can be said about Deleuze: his assertion on “the absolute identity of the image and movement” overlooks the imageless nature of materiality without the perspective introduced by the living body.³⁹ His interpretation relies on the existence of two systems. One is centered around the living body and in relation to which images vary, and the other with no center and in which all the images act and react on one other on all their facets and in all their elements according to the constant laws of matter. The consequence is that, in the non-centered system, which is also the perspective of science, actions are not blocked and reflected as in the centered system. In passing through, actions fail to appear, although as actions and reactions they still constitute images but are “translucent,” with no marked lines and complexions.⁴⁰ They are “movement-images” turning into “perception-images” when they are stopped and reflected.⁴¹ My issue here is not with the identification of matter with movement but with the added specification of “movement-images.” It is axiomatic that for Bergson movement is not an attribute of a substance that would exist in a motionless state. To be is movement, the only distinction being that movement can be ascending or descending according as we deal with life or materiality.

My contention is that the appearance of images is dependent on the encounter between the two types of movement.

It is equally undeniable that Bergson speaks of images as the common content of the system of matter and the system of perception. But one must ask whether the definition of matter as an aggregate of images is not a mere extension of perception: the intuitive knowledge of matter—which for Bergson gives the final access to reality—does not distinguish images acting and images reacting. Rather, it sees an indivisible movement, which translates into the local movements of images acting and reacting only as a result of an act of selection and contraction. Where there is only an undivided movement of the whole, the vital perspective distinguishes a localized section determined by the actions and reactions of images. Thus, the melting of sugar in a glass of water appears as a local event on the condition that I isolate the elements from the rest. The isolation relates the elements in terms of actions and reactions of images when in reality they are just the perceived, isolated part of the change in the whole. Remove the perceiver, and the elements lose their distinction and causal connections and dissolve into the indistinct flux of the whole. In other words, the system of matter described in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* is less about the essence of materiality than about the viewpoint of scientific knowledge. It is true that for Bergson science transcends perception but without ever abandoning its allegiance to practice, as attested by the fact that science always needs some image (atom, force, light, etc.) to define materiality. Even intuitive knowledge must have recourse to image to translate its vision into the language of intelligence.

Deleuze's interpretation ultimately rests on the identification of matter with light. What else could the something that is movement-image, that is, image without being concrete, be but light? In his own words, "the set of movements, of actions and reactions is light which diffuses, which is propagated 'without resistance and without loss.' The identity of the image and movement stems from the identity of matter and light. The image is movement, just as matter is light."⁴² So identified, matter becomes unrevealed light, as opposed to perception-image, which also would be light but as revealed. To say that this interpretation pulls Bergson toward Deleuzian views is hardly an exaggeration. As John Mullarkey remarks, "Bergson nowhere explicitly equates matter and light."⁴³ As argued in the previous chapter, matter is the lowest degree of duration, specifically expressed through an undoing movement by which

it constantly repeats itself, unable as it is to contract itself in the form of an image. Stretching out through a constantly undoing present in default of being able to fuse its moments into a swelling present is its mode of existence, as confirmed by pure perception. This nature of matter is the reason why Bergson says, “every perception is already memory,” given that concrete or normal perception is made of “an incalculable multitude of remembered elements,” that is, of the contraction of incalculable multitude of pure perceptions.⁴⁴ H. Wildon Carr’s pertinent words say it best:

Images are not the whole reality and reality is not an aggregation of images. Reality is duration and images are a selection within, and a contraction of, duration. The activity which selects and contracts is memory. Without memory there would be no images; without images’ there would be no perception.⁴⁵

Stated differently, what appears as image is indeed matter, but this does not mean that matter is composed of images. As manifestations of possible actions, images do not make up reality, given that the real is the whole and distinct objects have no reality in themselves.

Challenging the ontological identification of matter with image is to give room for the phenomenality of matter, precisely as image. In this way, image indicates not so much the nature of materiality as its ability to appear. Any part of matter appears when it is subjected to an act of selection or, which is the same thing, when it reflects the possible actions of an active image as a result of which it joins a centered system. What is said here falls under the distinction between truth and reality, as analyzed in the first chapter of this book. The appearance of matter as image is how it becomes the object of possible actions subsequent to a selective act. According as the projected actions are successful or not, they assume the character of being true or false. As an outcome of an act of selection, the image appearance of matter can be characterized as an inventive act. However, as a product of actualization, the appearance relies on an implicit disposition inherent in matter, and so requires an act by which it develops from a mere possibility into an actual image. Outside the act, there is the reality of matter in which what is made to appear is reabsorbed as an indistinct disposition. The continuity of matter is precisely this neutralized whole where nothing stands out because every distinction and appearance is in a virtual state.

It is important to remember that the phenomenality of matter is not something different from its nature. The act of selection does not add anything to materiality: it simply frames it, that is, makes it appear in a centered and compressed system. Images do not undergo any ontological metamorphosis as they are simply cut off ideally from the whole and compressed in a narrow frame. It puts on notice the view that images do not hide a back-world. Bergson insists that we go from the system of matter to the system of perception “by way of diminution” so that there is less and not something different in image appearance.⁴⁶ We are dealing here with a delicate balance between the two systems: the statement that there is no image outside the perceiver does not entail the inference that image is a subjective notion. As an outcome of contraction, and not of subjective projection, image appearance is neither hiding nor altering the nature of the given reality. It simply gives tonality to elements selected from reality itself and is comparable to the use of dyes in histology to enhance the visibility of tissues under a light microscope. The tissues are not the organism; they are just samples in the same way as images are. Moreover, the dyes do not alter the tissues; they make them visible just as contraction gives qualitative distinctions to matter’s undifferentiated flux.

The adherence of images to the nature of matter offers an easy passage from the quantitative to the qualitative and vice versa. Once we admit that images are contracted appearances, the passage from perception to matter amounts to disengaging matter from the rhythm of our duration. The result of the disengagement is that the perceived qualities of matter tend to resolve into homogeneous movements of extremely rapid and repetitive vibrations. Matter vibrates because it cannot endure in any appreciable sense of the word, and extensity is how vibrations are sustained by a repetitive present, which, however extremely fast it may be, never reaches the point of simultaneity. Accordingly, what human consciousness grasps as a sensation of red light in one second corresponds to a succession of vibrations such that it would require “more than 250 centuries of our history” to experience it.⁴⁷ This ability to condense is quite in line with the practical function of perception, since a basic condition for acting on matter is this power to summarize its interminable history and solidify its movements into distinct moments. Both the efficiency and freedom of action depend on the extent the perceiver is able to disengage from the rhythm of matter. Without this ability to

step back by contracting movements, no fixed objects would be given and consequently no action could be inserted into the necessity of matter.

To assign the heterogeneity of sensible qualities to the contraction operated by our memory implies that this heterogeneity tends toward relative homogeneity where the contraction relaxes to the point of extensity, of the spreading of moments outside one another. In thus understanding quality as a contraction of quantity, Bergson overcomes dualism without denying difference. Though mind and matter are different, the bridge between the two is no less tangible, since we move from the one to the other via their respective rhythm of duration. Thanks to this non-dualistic view, Bergson confidently states that the perceived images and reality are not apart without, however, identifying the two. As suggested earlier, the availability of a passage from the one to the other by way of condensation overcomes the dualistic dichotomy of subject and object in favor of a distinction in terms of the part and the whole. Bridging the dualistic gap brings out the points of agreement and disagreement between Immanuel Kant and Bergson. In many ways, Bergson's notion of image stays in line with Kant's distinction between the form and content of perception. For both of them, the content comes from outside, but undergoes an arrangement by which it complies with the needs and possibilities of the perceiver. The subjective input (space and time for Kant, space and time as contraction for Bergson) effects a work of organization adapting the external to the perceiver. Yet, despite this major accord, Bergson does not go along with Kant's conclusion that "objects in themselves are quite unknown to us."⁴⁸ Kant's conclusion is inevitable as long as subject and object have nothing in common: if we cannot go from the one to the other, then their connection can only be viewed as an imposition of the one on the other. Not so with Bergson: differentiating matter and mind by their durational intensity means that image appearance is just a selection and intensification of numberless of pure perceptions, which, being devoid of memory, represent the lowest degree of duration, and so coincide with materiality itself. In other words, Kant's error is not to have distinguish the form and content of perception, but to have been unable to connect them by precisely overcoming dualism. What else but dualism demands that there be an ontological disparity between how things appear and how they are in themselves?

BERGSON AND PHENOMENOLOGY: THE ISSUE OF THE SUBJECT

At first look, the rejection of perception as a projection of mental states seems to bring Bergson closer to the views of the school of phenomenology. At the same time, however, one cannot dismiss the impression that Bergson is no closer to phenomenology than he is to dualism or materialism. While there is agreement on the exclusion of projection, the reasons for the exclusion given by Bergson and phenomenologists are diametrically opposed. Though there is no doubt that phenomenology constitutes a radical departure from traditional positions, Bergson realizes an even more radical rupture. With phenomenology, consciousness still retains the prerogative of revealing things while with Bergson, as we saw, things become perceivable as images, as components of the centered system of revealed consciousness.

In addition to rejecting the theory of projection, one can see some similarity in the methods used to achieve such a result. Bergson's description of the world in terms of images subsequent to the suspension of philosophical theories about the nature and reality of the world shows some similarity with the phenomenological reduction. To set aside theories defending the reality or ideality of the world is to bracket traditional philosophical positions so as to describe phenomena as they are really given.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, despite some affinity in the methods used, the two philosophies have different starting points leading to incompatible conclusions. Accordingly, my purpose is less to effect a rapprochement between the two systems of thought than to counter some of the harsh attacks made against Bergson's theory of perception by phenomenologists, particularly Sartre. Not only do these attacks often reflect misconceptions, but they are virulent enough to encourage a biased reading of Bergsonism.

As previously mentioned, the dispute with phenomenology has to do with Bergson's apparent neglect of the defining attribute of consciousness, to wit, the attribute of being always consciousness of something. The view that concrete perception, that is, perception informed by memory, presupposes an impersonal perception challenges the intentionality of consciousness. Thus, Sartre observes that for Bergson, instead of revealing things, consciousness goes from the thing to the subject. This reverse process is inscribed in the Bergsonian amalgamation of things with images. The view of matter as the ensemble of images discards the

radical difference between being and being perceived by suggesting that things participate in consciousness. What is more, the description of reality as image is merely a reiteration of traditional idealism. This is further confirmed by Bergson's insistence that there is less and not something else in perception than in reality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty adds his voice to the criticism by noting that Bergson's notion of image fails to "distinguish between consciousness and the object of consciousness."⁵⁰

Phenomenologists deplore the overlooking of the intentionality of consciousness because the notion is, so they believe, the only way out of the impasses of classical theories of perception. Whatever the explanation of the cause and mechanism of perception, the various schools of dualism, materialism, and idealism agree that images are internally formed and then projected outwardly with all the intricate questions that such a process inevitably raises. As phenomenology sees it, the principal defect of these classical theories is the disregard of intentionality, of the attribute of consciousness as consciousness of something. Only when consciousness is analyzed as aiming at, as being outside itself does the need for recourse to internal images and their projection vanishes. We do not have, on the one hand, a closed consciousness and, on the other, an external world: subjectivity is ecstasy, a mode of aiming at the world.

The phenomenological solution unmistakably underlines that the crucial point of discord with Bergsonism is the issue of the subject, even though Bergson does not ignore the role of the subject in perception. As we saw, the subject appears with the intervention of memory, without which there are no images. This connection between memory and image appearance already indicates that Sartre's criticisms originate from a misconception. Images presuppose the contracting and immobilizing power of a subject; they are not to be identified with things since Bergson believes things do not exist on their own. What we call things are actually images in that they are the products of the act of framing the given reality so that there are no things behind the images. Phenomenologists misunderstand Bergson's intention, notably that it is necessary to suspend the subject to grasp, not the form, but the content of perception. Hence the idea of pure perception, which, as an act of selection, is an impersonal perception. Phenomenology starts and explains perception with the attribute of consciousness as consciousness of something. For Bergson, consciousness is not the starting moment; it has to be first revealed or released. The primary trigger of consciousness and perception is the brain, not because the brain engenders images, but because

it releases consciousness by delaying the necessity of matter. The created temporal gap inserts indetermination into materiality and actualizes a centered system of images. As a result, what we have is not the consciousness of an object but an impersonal consciousness, or consciousness as coincidence. This coincidence is how consciousness is revealed as a quality of reality instead of being that which exclusively reveals things. As Victor Goldschmidt puts it, "Bergson does not think that consciousness necessarily needs a correlative, or to speak like Husserl, that consciousness is always consciousness of something."⁵¹ The intervention of memory is necessary for the impersonal consciousness to coalesce with the mode of being consciousness of something.

Though Bergsonism and phenomenology agree that things are perceived where they are, that perception is not a subjective projection of images residing in consciousness, they fundamentally differ because for Bergson images are not ways of aiming at the world but are the things themselves, with the understanding that "thing" signifies the part that is revealed, and not an objectively existing entity. The perceived is not that of which one is conscious of but consciousness itself as images. Things are perceived where they are, not because the consciousness of the subject illuminates them where they are, but because where they are and where they appear as images are one and the same thing. The case is different with phenomenology: though things are perceived where they are, they appear for somebody instead of simply acquiring the quality of appearance. To the extent that they owe their appearance to the intentionality of consciousness, the appearance is exclusive to the perceiving consciousness. By contrast, appearance is an acquired quality for Bergson; it is not the doing of consciousness but that of the special ability of the brain to insert indetermination into matter. Again, the function of the brain is not to concoct images; it is to alter its connections with the influences that it receives in such a way that the suppression of their ability to appear is lifted temporarily, like opening the curtains makes things visible in a room.

It seems to me that an analyst like Rafael Winkler misses this crucial point when he maintains that "Bergson's notion of conscious perception is Husserlian to the extent that it is teleological and intentional—it is always directed to objects in view of utility."⁵² Winkler bases his argument on the fact that the Bergsonian analysis of perception explains how consciousness centers and serves the body by selecting the things that it needs. Since both the acts of centering and serving reveal intentional

relations, Winker concludes that a rapprochement between Bergson and phenomenology is a defensible position. True, Bergson greatly highlights the practical purpose of perception, but to expand the practicality to the point of reading intentionality is to overlook his originality. Not only are the centering and the selection the work of the brain, but also the resulting consciousness is not in the mode of consciousness of an object: it is the object itself as image or quality. Objects reveal themselves to the body; they are not revealed by consciousness, as would require intentionality. Consequently, contrary to the Bergsonian position, perception is and remains a subjective act for phenomenology because the appearance is appearance to somebody. It is not an objective quality, but how consciousness is aiming at things. The fundamental difference, then, is that, for phenomenology, consciousness is primarily and essentially intentionality, while for Bergson intentionality is an acquired attribute grafted on an impersonal consciousness that is materiality itself as soon as its necessity is delayed or, which is the same thing, it recovers duration, memory, be it in the form of a cogito or the contraction of movements.

So long as the consciousness of the subject is supposed to illuminate the object, the object has a double existence: one for itself and another for consciousness. Let alone coinciding, the two existences are separated by an unbridgeable gap, the very one separating the subjective and the non-subjective. To be specific, while for Bergson the object is perceived in itself on account of the coincidence of consciousness, of thingness and image, with phenomenology it is perceived as it appears, with the understanding that it cannot appear otherwise. According to phenomenology, though subjective, perception does not hide or deform the object: it simply reveals it. In so doing, it does not affect the object as it is in itself, since the object as it is in itself is nothing in that it is unrevealed. For instance, to the extent that there is no perception without distancing, space is constitutive of the perceived object. To remove space is to remove the form and content of the perception, given that the externality of the thing to the perceiver precisely prevents it from being ever given as it is in itself. In short, that which is not revealed is not the unknowable; it is just the non-existent. As Sartre puts it, "appearance does not refer to being as Kant's phenomenon refers to the noumenon."⁵³ Even so, replacing images by intentionality does not entail that "there is adequacy between perception and the perceived."⁵⁴ Adequacy requires coincidence, that is, the conflation of consciousness and its object by which alone things are revealed to us instead of being

revealed by us. The first overcomes subjectivism while the latter allows us to speak, not of reality in itself, but only of phenomena, of things for us, since to use Sartre's terminology, "the character of a phenomenon comes to being through the for-itself."⁵⁵ This is so true that Sartre admits the danger of falling into "an insurmountable dualism" once being is said to appear to consciousness without this appearance being what the thing is in itself.⁵⁶ The lesson here is that the only way to avoid the dualism of being and appearance is by overcoming subjectivism, which overcoming is impossible as long as there is an ontological distinction between consciousness and the object of consciousness. In deriving perception from an act of coincidence, Bergson objectifies consciousness itself and gives us a theory where "the reality of things is no more constructed or reconstructed, but touched, penetrated, lived."⁵⁷

To see consciousness as an inherent quality, and not as an appearance due to an intentional act, to grasp, therefore, the impersonal basis of subjectivity, one must bracket the subject. As aptly put by Camille Riquier, Bergson's theory of pure perception appeals to reduction, but "a reduction radically inverse to that of Husserl, bracketing not the world but the subject that perceives it."⁵⁸ As a methodological tool, this bracketing signifies not so much the rejection of intentionality as the establishment of the impersonal basis whose precedence enables the genesis of the subject from that basis. Bergson does not think that the subject is an appropriate starting point, given that we are dealing with evolving living individuals entirely dependent on the world. Were we theorizing about sovereign and fully formed thinking beings, the precedence of the ability to reveal could be a defensible starting point. But since life begins with complete dependency, the feasible order is that the world first reveals itself so as to allow the living being to grow into a subject. The notion of the genesis of the subject derives from this need to think of a transition, a durational process from a living being to the cogito, essentially through the rising importance of memory. The reward of this changed order is the maintenance of a pure contact with reality even as subjectivity increasingly expands its presence.

According to phenomenologists, the absence of intentionality prevents Bergsonism from being a philosophy of "opening" to the world.⁵⁹ But the whole question is to know whether a world revealed by consciousness is really an opened world. For phenomenology, consciousness undoubtedly reveals the world, but it reveals it in its own subjective terms. There is a great difference in terms of openness between saying

perception reveals things in themselves and saying perception makes things appear. In the one, subjectivity is rooted in the reality of things; in the other, subjectivity opens the world but only to itself. Rightly, Georges Gurvitch speaks of Bergsonism as a new realism, “the realism that includes consciousness itself,” for “whereas Husserl’s intentional consciousness slightly opened consciousness to close it upon itself, the Bergsonian method ... and the appeal to ‘direct contact with things’ terminated the subjectivism and idealism that dominated for many centuries.”⁶⁰

THE MECHANISM OF PERCEPTION

Since Bergson reverses the phenomenological direction of going from the subject to things, the remaining pressing question is to know how things are revealed without the active agency of a subject. Without a doubt, the bracketing of the subject and the derivation of perception from actions and reactions between material things bring Bergson in the vicinity of materialism. However, as already noted, the huge difference is that, although Bergson attributes pure perception to material connections and the brain, he strongly rejects the idea that the brain is an organ of representation. But then, what does the brain exactly do and how does this operation prompt the appearance of things? Given that we have already established that to perceive is not to form an image in the mind but to select by leaving out what is of no interest to the living body, the question amounts to asking about the precise mechanism by which the act of selecting results in a conscious phenomenon, understood as impersonal and objective or as the possible action of a particular image.

To speak of the living body as a particular image is to acknowledge a distinction between materiality as the ensemble of images and the body. The formation of a center of action means that the living body is capable of real actions, that is, of actions that are not typical of the mechanical reactions prevailing in the system of matter. Actions unlike the determined actions and reactions of matter are those that manifest some choice and hence some disengagement from necessity. Recall that the distinction between the living body and the images of the system of matter is not yet expressed in terms of subject and object; it simply pinpoints a relative disengagement from necessity. Rather than being subjectively framed, a distinction based on some measure of indeterminism is behavioral since it has to do with the way the living image acts.

This behavioral difference invites us to see conscious relations as a condition of real actions, obvious as it is that conscious appearance is of no use where actions and reactions are strictly determined. Already, mere observation confirms that the manifestation of consciousness depends on the extent to which action affords choice. The more action is automatic, the less it is conscious, a good illustration being the unconscious nature of our habitual actions. The observation that consciousness appears or disappears according as action accommodates choices or not can help us understand both the virtuality of consciousness in matter and its activation. As the lowest degree of duration, materiality can be considered as “a neutralized and consequently a latent consciousness, a consciousness of which the eventual manifestations hold each other reciprocally in check, and annul each other precisely at the moment when they might appear.”⁶¹

If necessity suppresses or blocks the manifestation of consciousness, it is logical to infer that a mechanism capable of suspending the necessity of matter is liable to actualize virtual consciousness into the conscious perception of images. And what could be this mechanism if not, as already alluded to, the insertion of some delay, given that the introduction of a delay in a system governed by automatism generates hesitation? Delay provides “a little slice of time” between received and outgoing movements and during this real time necessity is suspended.⁶² While what is automatic shuts off consciousness, what delays automatism creates a temporal gap that affords choice, and so converts images into possible actions or perceptions. The larger the temporal gap, the more extended is the field of possible action. This deduction of conscious perception—not of consciousness itself—from the type of action connecting images establishes conscious perception as an indispensable condition of any action implicating choice. In thus inferring conscious perception from images interacting in a particular way, Bergson is perfectly consistent with his idea that perception stems from things rather than being the projection of a subject.

The mechanism by which delay takes place points to none other than the action of the brain. Bergson establishes this role by contrasting the brain with the reflex function of the spinal cord. The difference between the two is not that the brain produces representations, but that the external stimulus, unlike the immediate, involuntary reactions of the spinal cord, takes a detour via the encephalon before reaching the spinal cord and provoking a motor reaction. Short of generating

representation, what else can the transit through the brain entail but a delay between reception and execution, which delay allows a chosen response? The primary role of the brain is thus “to delay” communication and make sure that “the peripheral excitation gets into relation with this or that motor mechanism, chosen and no longer prescribed.”⁶³ Both the delay and the resulting chosen response turn the brain as well as the living body into an instrument of freedom. Such a positive role underscores the overcoming of the old dualism between mind and body, whose consequence was the definition of freedom as a victory over the body perceived as the side of human nature opposing freedom. In assigning the suspension of necessity and the possibility of chosen reaction to the living body, Bergson erases the opposition between mind and body by showing that the latter is an instrument designed to get around determinism by using determinism.

Let us keep in mind that this instrument of freedom applies only to a small part of the universal interaction of all images, the part received by the senses and transmitted to the brain. As a matter of fact, sensory receptors by which light, sound, odor, taste, etc. are captured are selectively sensitive to the environment. For instance, the human eye, which is only sensitive to vibrations of certain frequency ranges, cannot detect radiation that is outside the visible region of the spectrum. This selective nature of the senses enables the living body to detect the objects that it needs in the environment and avoid those that are detrimental. The unselected part, which is the greater part, is not delayed: it passes through and hence remains unconscious to the great benefit of action, since the limitation of perceptions to the body is how they manifest its possible actions.

This limitation is realized by the ensuing connection of delayed movements with the motor possibilities of the body. The coordination of the motor ability of the body with sensory stimuli is the second crucial function of the brain. Bergson’s famous but often misunderstood parallel of the brain with a “central telephonic exchange” means that, in addition to receiving messages from outside, it sends them to selected motor mechanisms.⁶⁴ Surely, the coordination of external stimuli with motor responses does not fully explain why the responses allow choice. The full explanation appears when we note that, by the time the stimuli reach the motor tracks, they are transformed into “nascent actions.” Because a multitude of motor routes are open to the same stimulus at the same time, it is bound to “dissipate itself in innumerable motor

reactions which are merely nascent.”⁶⁵ So divided, received stimuli lose their deterministic impact and turn into sketched stimulants, into solicitations to choose among diverse possible actions. Nascent actions are, therefore, motor sketches, actions prefigured but not performed. In the words of Bergson, they are “movements begun, but not executed, the indication of a more or less useful decision, but not that constraint which excludes choice.”⁶⁶ As such, they are felt as an invitation to act since actions simply started spur us to execute and finish them. Moreover, they reveal the particular status of the living body, which, unlike other images, is felt from inside. That the body is perceived and felt at the same time means that the nascent actions resulting from the coordination between incoming and outgoing movements translate into attitudes, postures of the body corresponding to revealed possible actions. What is said here relates to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “motor intentionality,” which he defines as a “motor project” acting as a connector between representation and the execution of action, provided one replaces “intentionality” with stimulant.⁶⁷

The corporeal translation of the feeling induced by nascent actions confirms that affection occurs in the internal space of the body, just as perception occurs where things are. This means that affections are extended just as perceptions are. The difference between the two is that distance is annulled in the case of affection so that the object to be perceived coincides with the perceiver. To the extent that the coincidence prevents the translation of received movements into possible external actions, the divided movements turn into motor sketches that are felt in the form of bodily attitudes. The coordination of motor dispositions with incoming movements in such a way that together they impel to action constitutes the living body as a sensorimotor system, which is the very basis of its spontaneity. Let it be added that this type of spontaneity does not necessarily implicate a thinking consciousness; it is simply a motor spontaneity that is halfway from mechanical response and deliberate decision. The latter presupposes and further extends spontaneous behavior so that, as a higher activity emerging from a lower motor spontaneity, deliberate decisions do not conflict with Bergson’s position that pure perception does not require a thinking consciousness. The spontaneity of the living body resulting from the internal feeling induced by nascent actions is enough to account for the activities associated with perception. At the lower stage of perception, consciousness is not yet a subject: it “appears as a feeling ... the feeling of spontaneity.”⁶⁸

To better assess the role of nascent actions, let us consider the sensorimotor theory of perception, as developed by Alva Noë and J. Kevin O'Regan. Agreeing on many important points with the Bergsonian theory, the two scholars reject the idea that perception takes place in the perceiver, and maintains that the brain is necessary but not sufficient to account for perception. Also, emphasizing the practical dimension of perception in agreement with Bergson, they argue that "visual experience is not something that happens *in* individuals. It is something they *do*."⁶⁹ They add that this practical function stems from "a set of rules of interdependence between stimulation and movement," the very one from which Bergson derives the spontaneity of the living body.⁷⁰ Consequently, as it is for Bergson, the adaptation of the living body to the environment is not effected through the cerebral replica of external objects, but through the synchronization between reception and reaction. The synchronization makes the mental duplication of objects superfluous and so removes the need to locate perception in the perceiver. As an illustration, Noë and O'Regan compare the living body's adaptation to the environment to a missile tracking an airplane due to its ability to modify its behaviors in response to changes in received information.

Noë and O'Regan concede that the tracking system of the missile, unlike the living body, does not perceive. Where is the difference between the two systems? To raise such a question is to acknowledge that the sensorimotor account needs an additional element to explain perception. Although we have coordination between reception and movement in both cases, in the case of the missile, the coordination results in automatism, which excludes conscious perception. In effect, the two scholars had no other choice but to presuppose conscious perception because their working premises did not allow them to deduce it from the sensorimotor account. To be aware of and responsive to the environment, the living body, so they say, must, in addition to coordinating reception and movement, "integrate its coupling behavior with its broader capacities for thought and rationally guided action."⁷¹ Given that perception is a primitive activity that precedes all other activities, to appeal to higher intellectual faculties to explain the foundational one is to mix up the logical order of things. Noë and O'Regan should have first inquired into the reason why the tracking missile is not consciously aware. In so doing, they would have come to the realization that, although there is coordination in both cases, in the case of the living body, the coordination only induces nascent actions, which allow latitude

of choice resulting in conscious perception. In addition to coordinating stimulation with motor response, the brain inserts indeterminism by way of nascent actions, thereby transforming automatism into possible action. Needless to say, the sensorimotor account of perception misses the fact that, once the theory of the brain as an organ of representation is laid to rest, the inherence of consciousness in matter turns into a logical precondition. As soon as the inherence is admitted, it becomes easy to explain how the brain actualizes what is but dormant in matter.

To fully explain perception, the two functions of the brain, delaying and coordinating, must be completed by the manner the selected parts of the environment that are of interest to the living body are made to appear. True, as selection, perception omits what does not concern the body, but it does it in such a way that the selected portions adopt forms of appearance that speak to the motor ability of the body. In addition to standing out, selected elements present distinct outlines giving them the character of individualized objects. Though for Bergson the problem is to understand how the source of the stimulus that the body selects stands out, becomes visible, many of Bergson's critics attribute the conversion to conscious perception to some kind of action on the part of the living body. According to Leonard Lawlor, for instance, perception occurs when the light emanating from objects is reflected by the spontaneity of the body instead of being refracted. The reflection draws "a virtual image" so that "perception is a mirage of reflected light."⁷² In the same vein, Carr speaks of "perceptions as the reflection back by one center of the influences reaching it from others."⁷³ Bergson does characterize perception by the terms "impeded refraction," "total reflection," "effect of mirage," but the truth is that perception is neither reflection nor mirage.⁷⁴ As already explained, the terms are used analogically to explain the appearance of perception as reflection or mirage; they do not portray the true nature of perception. The proof that it is about appearance in the sense of make-believe is provided by the fact that Bergson speaks of "rays," which, "instead of passing through those centers [of action], will appear to be reflected and thus to indicate the outlines of the object which emits them."⁷⁵

The terms "reflection" and "mirage" are used to illustrate why we have great difficulty in understanding perception as an objective process that goes from objects to the perceiver, in contrast to the more apparent reverse process of the perceiver illuminating objects. The objective account of perception cannot dismiss the belief that the subject

illuminates objects, any more than the scientific knowledge of the size of the sun can alter our perception of the star as a small disc. It should be noted that the seeming movement from the perceiver to the object produces an effect akin to a mirage: unlike hallucination, a mirage is really perceived except that it is not perceived where the object is. Similarly, a reflected image would not coincide with the object, which is exactly why theories of perception cannot avoid subjectivism. While perception is an objective interaction between images, the way the living body interacts with images is, as we will see in some detail shortly, responsible for the appearance of perception as a projection of a process taking place inside the perceiver. Both the capture of some of the influences of surrounding images and the delay of reaction create the illusion that representation emanates from the body. Moreover, the permeation of the centered system of perception with memory is bound to strengthen the falsehood that perception proceeds from the subject. Let us agree, then, that the likening of perception to “an effect of mirage” is Bergson speaking, to quote one author, “in the mode of as if: by preventing total refraction, with the consequence that the luminous rays cannot pursue their way, the body acts as though it were a reflector.”⁷⁶

So rectified, the operation by which Bergson explains both the appearance and the true nature of perception is rather simple. While an ordinary image acts as a passageway for the modifications emanating from all the images, the encounter of the actions of images with living bodies, which Bergson defines as “zones of indetermination” and equates with a “black screen,” presents a different outcome in that some of the actions cannot pass unopposed.⁷⁷ In capturing some of the modifications, sense organs absorb, isolate, and channel them without any refraction to the brain where they are delayed, divided, and sent to selected motor paths. The purpose of the entire process is to prevent vibrations from propagating and producing immediate reactions. This ability to prevent refraction and reflection likens the body to a black screen. The whole question is to understand that this process is simultaneously how the sources sending the vibrations are made to protrude. According to Bergson, when the rays coming from surrounding images meet an image that acts as a black screen, and not as a reflector, the outcome is that the images shine out. To convert an unperceived image to a perceived one, Bergson writes, “it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary to obscure some of its aspects ... so that the remainder, instead

of being encased in its surroundings as a *thing*, should detach itself from them as a *picture*.”⁷⁸

To correctly picture the operation and its outcome, let us see what would happen if the body were to throw more light on the surrounding images. It would mean that the body reacts to the rays through refraction and/or reflection, the outcome of which is that there is more light instead of less. Just as car drivers approaching from opposite directions are temporarily blinded if they use high-beam headlights, any reflecting or refracting action of the part of the body will add more light to the surrounding images so that no particular image is distinguishable. If, however, acting as a black screen the body does not add more light to some of the vibrations reaching it, the sources from which they emanate detach themselves from all the rest. Nothing stands out in the unselected part of reality, due to the dazzling light caused by the instantaneous and total actions and reactions of images. Consequently, what the body has not selected remains translucent for lack of a darkening agent. By contrast, when the living body suspends its reactions to some aspects of the surrounding images, when, therefore, it does not add more light, to pursue the analogy, selected movements in the fused and indistinct existence of material continuity and interactions are cut out, shaped, and made to protrude, thereby appearing as distinct images. The selected aspects stick out from their flattened existence owing to the delay of reactions which, had they occurred, would leave them immersed in the surroundings. The actions and reactions of images in all their sides yield an entangled reality where nothing distinctly appears. The delay of the reactions of the body—not its actual action—to some of these actions extracts them from their natural state of entanglement and displays them as possible actions.

Now let us translate the physical analogy in psychological terms. Instead of acting as a reflector, we said that the living body delays its reactions by channeling the vibrations, to which it is selectively receptive, through the complicated maze of the nervous system. In so doing, it lifts the neutralization of consciousness by the automatic actions and reactions of images. Because the images sending the vibrations are not reacted to, the virtuality of consciousness is actualized and images are made to appear. Such an appearance is not consciousness of something, but images as consciousness, as possible actions of the living body. To simplify, if we take two images, representation remains virtual because the action of each image returns as reaction, and so neutralizes representation. However, if one image holds back its reactions, the other

source of movement is isolated and made to appear: the suspension of necessity allows its manifestation as an image.

To illustrate further, let us take the example of sounds, which according to science are vibrations. The sound emitted by an object in a room bounces off from all the present objects. None of these objects hears because each reacts automatically so that the process is restricted to vibrations received and returned by all objects. As a result, no sound is distinguishable in the room and hearing remains virtual. Now suppose we introduce in the room a living body. The vibrations are heard, not because the living body transforms them subjectively into sound, but because the ears capture the vibrations and channel them to the brain so that reaction is withheld. This suspension actualizes consciousness, not in the brain, but in the object emitting the vibration. This does not mean that the object hears itself for the obvious reason that necessity is suspended for the aspects that interest the living body and not for the object itself, which remains in the system of matter. The selected part is heard by the non-reacting image in the precise sense that it is given as its possible action. In other words, the selected part appears as impersonal consciousness by entering into the centered system of the living image.

LIMITATION AND PERCEPTION

We have encountered the notion of limitation at the beginning and during the various stages of this chapter. The decisive importance of the notion to the understanding of Bergsonism was also highlighted in the previous chapters. To conclude this chapter by showing how all that is said about the nature, significance, and mechanism of perception can be construed as a development of the concept of limitation would definitively establish its cardinal importance to Bergson's philosophy.

Understanding perception in terms of limitation avoids the *petitio principia* vitiating theories of perception. It goes without saying that no philosopher would have interpreted perception as a projection of mental or cerebral states without the assumption that reality is made of distinct objects. The theory turning mental states into duplicates is unthinkable if no distinct and juxtaposed objects exist—with the exception of living beings which are, as we saw, closed off by nature. It begs the question to explain perception by mental duplication when, as reiterated in this and the previous chapters, the very existence of distinct objects presupposes perception. Evidently, one cannot duplicate what does not exist by itself

in the first place. Worse still, without distinct objects, perception would have to be coextensive with the whole world, and any suggestion making the perceived object a mental copy would entail the absurd implication that the representation of the whole world is contained in the brain. The whole attempt to frame perception in terms of contained images is futile: outside the assumption that things reveal themselves, no explanation of perception can avoid absurdity.

When one admits that the existence of distinct objects is a fiction and also rejects the untenable idea that the brain or the mind generates images, then the only remaining intelligible approach is the understanding of perception as an act of selection. Once again, unlike the idealistic denial, selection posits the existence of an objectively given world. What is perceived is not a mental projection, but a portion extracted from an externally existing world. Nor are images generated by the brain, as the materialist position affirms, for the obvious reason that to substitute the brain for the mind does nothing to remove the idealistic questioning of the objective existence of the world. The only way to avoid the false problem hovering over the objective existence of the world is to end the understanding of perception in subjective or cerebral terms and see it as an extract taken on an externally given world.

The concept of selection both posits the whole and states that the portion is not of a different nature than the whole. Perception is just a limitation of the world to the practical possibilities of the living image: it is not a duplicate and for this same reason does not hide a back-world. Accordingly, the right way of posing the problem is as follows. Because of the unity and continuity of materiality, in principle, consciousness should have coincided with the world and felt it from inside. In reality, only a small portion is revealed, and this in the form of perception, as an externally given appearance. We recognize here the existence of two systems—the system of materiality and the centered system of perception. The obvious way to go from the material system to the centered system is by narrowing the circle around one image; it is not by duplicating the world in the living image. When perception is conceived as limitation, it becomes easy to explain why the whole is not perceived. It is simply what remains unconscious because it is left out, as opposed to the selected part, which is the object of focus. Evidently, perceiving the whole, assuming that it is possible, is of no use to the living body. The whole cannot be an object of action for a limited being; what is more, such a perception would be incapable of the discernment that is vital for

a living being. To detect, move, and appropriate the things that it needs, the living being must precisely be able to select and so must have at its disposal a centered and limited system of perception. The brain acquires its proper function when we see it as a narrowing device by which the whole is left out in favor of the part that interests the living body.

The misunderstanding here would be to give the concept of limitation a negative meaning. The interpretation overlooks that perceiving the whole amounts to unconsciousness, which is characteristic of the situation of any material point as a mere passage of all the influences reaching it. Conscious perception occurs where there is some focus, where the given becomes an object to an active being. In short, it requires isolating, framing some aspects by detaching it from the rest. Thus, the noises that I am not hearing at a given time are not those I did not receive, but those I did not isolate because I let them pass. By contrast, those that my ears isolate and my brain delays, I hear them because I made them stand out or, which is the same thing, actualized them as images. In the succinct words of Pierre Montebello, for Bergson, “consciousness is only a limitation of presence.”⁷⁹

What could be the ultimate meaning of limitation if not the setting of the condition of self-overcoming that the last chapter qualified as the very meaning of life? What narrows gains in intensity, and from there the *élan* to go beyond and overcome its limitation through creativity. This surpassing is none other than the use of intelligence to expand our knowledge of the world and our material power, on the one hand, and of intuitive knowledge to patch up our disjointed relationship with our own self and the world, on the other. The next chapter will show how the limitation of consciousness to perception leads to the overflowing faculty of memory, with the ability to contract at will while possessing a point of insertion into materiality, thereby upgrading action by means of knowledge.

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58. Camille Riquier, "Y a-t-il une réduction phénoménologique dans Matière et Mémoire?" in *Annales Bergsoniennes II*, 282 (my translation).
59. Renaud Barbaras, "Le problème de l'expérience," in *Annales Bergsoniennes II*, 292 (my translation).
60. Georges Gurvitch, "Deux aspects de la philosophie de Bergson: Temps et Liberté," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 65, no. 3 (1960): 307 (my translation).
61. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 331.
62. Valentine Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters: Transcendental Experience and the Thought of the Virtual* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 25.
63. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 19–20.
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65. Ibid., 20.
66. Ibid., 2.
67. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 110.
68. Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters*, 22.
69. Alva Noë and J. Kevin O'Regan, "On the Brain-Basis of Visual Consciousness: A Sensorimotor Account," in *Vision and Mind: Selected Readings in the Philosophy of Perception*, eds. Alva Noë and Evan Thompson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 567 (italics in text).
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77. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 32.
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CHAPTER 6

Memory and the Being of the Subject

The last chapter raised the issue of memory in connection with perception. It specifically established that the work of memory explains the transition from pure to concrete perception. This connection with perception underlines the practical role of memory. Its importance cannot be underestimated, since it is with memory that the subject comes into play. The explanations of pure perception as essentially an outcome of bodily behavior and of concrete perception as the work of memory confront us with nothing less than the perennial question of the interaction of mind and body. Understanding how memory or the subject inserts into perception is to figure out the parts played by the mind and the body to produce a cooperative outcome, namely, concrete perception. Before developing the various facets of this cooperative relationship, this chapter first ascertains the practical orientation of memory and confronts those theories blurring the understanding of the relationship between memory and perception because of their initial failure to clearly demarcate the one from the other. Once the proper demarcation is made, the chapter moves to the study of the Bergsonian theory of memory and probes the cooperative union of mind and body.

MEMORY AND ACTION

Without memory, the last chapter states, the living being would be reduced to pure perception. As a result, it would be left with the instantaneous vision of the extremely rapid and repetitive vibrations of

materiality, the outcome of which would be its inability to release from and fix the flow of the given reality. Action is disabled if the living being is unable to extract itself from the particular rhythms of materiality and stabilize them into distinct objects. By contracting the instantaneous vibrations, memory converts them into a steady present and whose thickness depends on the place of the living being in the evolutionary scale. The other important role of memory in connection to action is the actualization of recognition. The availability of past experience is how action relies on prediction and becomes capable of intelligent and efficient responses. In other words, memory puts knowledge in the service of perception, thereby elevating it to the level of the perception of an intentional subject aiming at an externally given world.

The contributions of memory to perception are linked directly to the manifestation of consciousness. We noted that the present of consciousness has some thickness in that it cannot be reduced to a mathematical point. This thickness confirms that the conscious present is not cut off from the past, that, in fact, it continues the past. Thanks to this continuity, “the present itself is not a continuously evanescent and resurrecting point but real duration.”¹ In other words, consciousness is for Bergson already memory, since the prolongation of the past into the present is how consciousness escapes the non-conscious state of materiality, itself caused by matter’s inability to integrate its moments into an internal tension. Likewise, in the previous chapter we saw that consciousness appears in connection with the indetermination imparted by the brain’s capacity to retard and divide the external actions reaching the living body. Evidently, the ability to choose afforded by indetermination would change into automatic response or impulse if it were not educated by past experience. Consciousness maintains itself through choice, and choice is genuine when it relies on prediction, that is, when action is selected on the basis of foreseeable outcomes gathered from past experiences. In this way, memory sustains the indetermination that the body generates.

The particular problem that the service of memory to action generates remains hidden or is misconstrued so long as we see memory as a mere psychological function. The study of duration has familiarized us with the idea that the prolongation of the past into the present engenders an enduring present, and that this mode of being is characteristic of a being in the making, as opposed to the undoing nature of materiality (see Chapters 3 and 4). Since what is being made is made on the basis

of what is being unmade, the manner memory serves the body becomes a complicated issue. Materiality places the body in the descending ontological category; in contrast, memory is placed in the ascending category of durational contraction or spiritual mode of being. The fundamental hurdle that must be overcome to clarify the connection of memory with action is thus the question of knowing how that which is ascending and being made can look after and serve that which is caught in the descending trend of reality. In short, how does the ascent reverse course and coalesce with the descending mode so as to remain attentive to the body and its needs?

To begin answering this complex and difficult question, we should first pose and clarify the guiding principle that must be followed, namely, that “the orientation of our consciousness toward action appears to be the fundamental law of our psychical life.”² The fact that the mind follows a cumulative direction suggests that the narrowing of its scope conditions its junction with the body. To say so simply reconfirms the crucial role of the concept of limitation in Bergson’s philosophy. We saw it with perception: as an act of selection, perception reduces the given reality to the needs and possibilities of the body. The same need of limitation commands the bond of memory with action. Since the contracting nature of memory entails that the mind overflows the body, any adjustment between the two depends on the narrowing of the mind to the present interests of the body. It springs to mind that if all what is preserved or what is irrelevant were to come back, memory would not only be useless, but would also be extremely detrimental to practical life. Bergson calls this narrowing “*attention to life*”: it is as though the mind wore blinders so as to focus on the present of the body.³ The narrowing means that, in effect, my consciousness becomes the consciousness of my body. Failure or breach in the attention to life results in a disequilibrium that is transient or severe, according as we refer to dreams or insanity.

This limitation is none other than what is called forgetting. We forget, not because one present pushes out the previous present into non-being, but because of the fundamental orientation of the mind toward the needs of the body. The past is thus essentially a function, the function of forgetting so as to be attentive to the life of the body. The blockage that keeps what is not relevant (the past) unconscious, that is, forgetting is, therefore, a positive function. Forgetting appears as negative only when we overlook that it focuses our mind on the life of the body and that the body is our instrument of action and hence of

self-creation. Accordingly, recalling the past signifies not so much the magical reappearance of what had disappeared as the assumption by the past of a phantomlike appearance to the great benefit of the present of the body. This subterfuge turns all that is not contemporaneous to the body, in this case the past, into a ghostly existence, while the life of the body becomes the real, tangible substance.

Bergson gives a full sense of the functional nature of the past when he alerts us that “the question is just whether the past has ceased to exist or whether it has simply ceased to be useful.”⁴ Indeed, once we say that the past has ceased to exist, we will have to appeal to magical accounts to explain how the past reappears. By contrast, if the past is simply barred from consciousness because it is not relevant to the present, then its reappearance is easily explained as it means the regaining of usefulness. This blockage of what is not useful is indicative of the presence of a selective mechanism allowing the useful past into the light of consciousness. Just as in perception, the recall of the past must involve the selective function of the brain, this time turned toward the mind. We must be able to identify a property in the brain that works like a valve between the needs of the body and the perennial memory. A word of caution, the past cannot be useful by substituting itself for the given reality, which would result in hallucination and hence in the complete obstruction of practical engagement with the world. As explained later in this chapter, the past does not take the form of image, but of memory-image. As such, it is intangible enough not to be confused with the given reality, but sufficiently image-like to be relevant to present needs and solicitations.

ON THE CONSERVATION AND NATURE OF MEMORY

To firmly establish the connection between recollection and action, it is first necessary to clearly differentiate memory from perception. Failing to do so leads to a confusion blocking the understanding of the relationship between the two in terms of cooperation. According to Bergson, the confusion arises from the fact that, like perception, the recollection of the past takes the form of mental imagery. From this image appearance of the past, philosophers and psychologists conclude that memory is just perception in a weakened state. David Hume, for instance, assures us that memories copy perceptions, but “they can never entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment.”⁵ One implication of

this definition is that difference in intensity guards us from confusing the images of memory with those of perception. Yet, it is far from clear how a difference in intensity can denote the past: a weak sensation being still a present sensation, the lack of vivacity cannot be an effective criterion. To make a dependable distinction, the sensation itself must bear the mark of the past. Moreover, because recalling the past puts on an image appearance, it does not follow that it is a copy of perception, nor that it is conserved in the form of image. The way the problem is framed overlooks that “the difference between past and present, like that between perception and memory, is a difference in kind.”⁶

A difference in kind means not only that perception and memory are ontologically different, but also that their relationship is not one of succession. To posit a difference in kind is to exclude the notion that memory is a copy of perception; it is to remain consistent with the idea that the exclusive function of perception is to reveal matter while that of memory is to reveal spirit. Obviously, memory will not be just a pale copy of perception to the extent that it adds something new to what is perceived. Once it is admitted that memory enriches perception, the movement from perception to memory cannot be characterized in terms of loss, whether it is of vivacity or otherwise. Let us go further: difference in kind rules out that perception is first formed and that it becomes memory when it passes. Instead, Bergson maintains that “*the formation of memory is never posterior to the formation of perception; it is contemporaneous with it.*”⁷ He presents the rare but quite significant phenomenon of false recognition, otherwise known as *déjà vu*, as one supporting evidence of the contemporaneity of memory with perception. For a theory advocating the contemporaneity of memory with perception, false recognition should have been a normal state of mind. The fact that it is abnormal indicates that a specific mechanism prevents its occurrence by keeping the memory of the present, the impression of *déjà vu*, unconscious. Since having the memory of the present creates an impression of inevitability and dream, it is safe to assume that action requires its constant removal from the realm of conscious life. However, in extremely rare occasions, a moment of distraction can interrupt the mechanism, thereby removing the tension that is characteristic of wakefulness. In other words, false recognition occurs as a result of “a temporary enfeebling of general attention to life.”⁸

To account for both the difference in kind between memory and perception and their contemporaneity, Bergson speaks of “two jets exactly

symmetrical, one of which falls back towards the past whilst the other springs forward towards the future.”⁹ Nothing could give a better sense of difference than this simultaneous formation of memory and perception. The formation involves two different acts and so confirms that, not only the one is not the copy of the other, but also that they head in different directions. As a result, they land in separate realms that assign them dissimilar though complementary functions. As an outcome of these dissimilar but cooperative contributions, concrete perception inserts the dimension of representation into the revelation of the external world, thereby elevating the manifestation of materiality through pure perception to the level of the perception of a subject.

The apparent downside of a proposal advocating a radical distinction between perception and memory is that it renders the conservation of the past extremely hard to explain. After all, the conception of memory as a pale copy of perception offers the great advantage of the familiar notion of an original thing being preserved thanks to the availability of a copy. Unfortunately, the familiarity is obtained at the expense of a serious confusion, which is that whatever is conserved in the present and in whatever form it is conserved is still in the present and, as such, indicates the present, never that which is no more. A copy of something is a copy in the present. Moreover, the fact that it is in the present does not explain the conservation, since it raises the question of knowing what preserves the present. For the present to be able to preserve, something must preserve the present.

The crux of the matter is that the notion of memory as a copy of perception turns conservation into a false and, therefore, unsolvable problem. Whether one says that memories are conserved in the brain or the mind—depending on whether one follows the materialist or idealist doctrine—in both cases the problem is presented in terms of preserving images. Memory is viewed as a collection of saved images and the whole issue is to know how and where the images are conserved. To be sure, the issue of conservation is raised in connection to the passing of the present. Since the present is what passes, the reappearance of what used to be present inevitably raises the issue of its conservation. What better way to explain the reappearance than to say that it was saved somewhere. Clearly, this way of positing the problem is derived from the assumption that memory is a copy and that perception comes first. This precedence of perception also means that what is copied and preserved is the actual content of perception. Since perception is made of distinct

and juxtaposed objects, so is memory composed of the same objects but in the form of pale mental images. The lack of vivacity of these images compared to the objects of perception is simply due to the lack of the actual influences of objects on the sense organs. Just as the objects of perception are viewed, their copies in memory are considered as “ready-made things,” that is, as juxtaposed and external to one another and to which is assigned “an abiding place in problematic centers.”¹⁰

No doubt, for arrested things with precise contours to disappear and reappear, they must be somewhere and somehow conserved. But let us change our way of thinking: instead of arrested things, let us think of an act that continues unfinished. Such an act does not need to be conserved since it has never ceased. There is nothing to conserve where nothing stops being. The act continues unfinished means that there are no fixed things; instead, we have “the dynamic *progress* by which the one passes into the other.”¹¹ We recognize in this continuity and prolongation the defining features of duration (see Chapter 3). The features tell us that memory is not a storage, but the act of enduring, the act by which changing is being. It is axiomatic that where to change is to be, no distinct and fixed state exists, since such a change is precisely how the melting of all states into one another generates an indivisible and indistinct continuity. In this interpenetrating flow, nothing passes, just as nothing remains the same. The term “preservation” makes sense where there are distinct things with clear contours indicating where they begin and end. But where there is continuity with nothing distinct and fixed, preservation signifies nothing other than continuity, dynamic progress. This acceptance of continuity completely invalidates the search for a place where memories would be preserved. In a constantly changing continuity, what is real is the blending current, not distinct objects.

Replacing preservation with continuity, Bergson compares our life to a “single sentence, continued since the first awakening of consciousness, interspersed with commas, but never broken by full stops.”¹² His conclusion, namely, that all our past is there, that “all we have perceived, thought, willed, from the first awakening of our consciousness, persists indefinitely,” has made many commentators uncomfortable.¹³ Yet, the conclusion is perfectly in sync with the defining features of duration. The discomfort goes away if one keeps in mind that “conservation” does not entail that we can recall everything. As we will see shortly, while preservation is automatic, so to speak, the process of recall is a different matter in that it depends on other factors. As previously noted, the narrowing

of our consciousness to the consciousness of our body sinks whatever is not in the present of the body into unconsciousness. The unconscious does not regain a conscious state unless it is useful and assisted by devices enabling its imaginary retrieval, by which alone it can access consciousness. Short of being able to relive that which is no longer in the present of the body, we imagine or recreate it, that is, we obtain its representation as a past event.

The need to distinguish between the act of recalling and durational continuity further clarifies the contemporaneity of memory with perception. Since instead of copying and saving the contents of perceptions as they occur and in the way they occur, memory integrates, fuses all the moments, it engenders the sense of the self. As a synthesis, the self is one and multiple at the same time. This heterogeneous oneness is identity but given as character, that is, as a qualified, distinct thinking being, as opposed to the abstract, impersonal consciousness. "Our character, always present in all our decisions, is indeed the actual synthesis of all our past states," says Bergson.¹⁴ That memory generates character should not come as a surprise in light of the already analyzed function of contraction. Just as the perception of matter takes a qualitative appearance as a result of memory contracting its vibrations, similarly the continuous contraction of our life assigns thinking to a qualified entity, a somebody.

The above analyses are laden with some crucial implications. The first one is that nothing is conserved in memory in the form of image. To quote Frédéric Worms, unlike the distinct and juxtaposed appearances in a common and anonymous space of perceived images, "memories are conserved in a global, indistinct, and individualized fashion, in my history or character conceived as a confused totality."¹⁵ The nature of the conservation must be all the more emphasized because it has been misunderstood by many critics of Bergson's theory of memory. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre accuses Bergson of leaving "inert images at the heart of pure duration, like tiles at the bottom of a pool."¹⁶ According to Sartre, the only difference with the classical theory making memory into a copy of perception is that Bergson infuses some fluidity into the images, which fluidity does not alter their opaque nature and their inadequacy to the transparency of consciousness. The consequence is that Bergson fails to establish a difference in kind between memory and perception: the images composing memory are just copies of perception and, as such, differ only in intensity from the images of perception. What is said so far about duration and memory shows that Sartre's criticism is a complete

misreading. Because the recall of memory assumes an image appearance, it does not follow that memories are conserved as images. Quite the contrary, as we saw, they are not so much conserved as they are absorbed and fused into a continuous flux, precisely by losing their distinct appearance. By blending into one another, they cease to be images.

In what other form than in the form of ideas can images that have ceased to be distinct and outlined exist? And what is this existence if not the uninterrupted act of duration? The result of the melting continuity is none other than the consciousness of the self. Obviously, for the self to be multiple within oneness, it has to be a self-idea, a self-intuition, its variety in oneness expressing its inner depth and richness. Insofar as the fusion of oneness and multiplicity implies that memory is inextensive, it discloses that “my past is only knowledge,” and that in this knowledge “the object is no longer distinct from the subject.”¹⁷ This self-knowledge is the very act of being, a mode of existence, since the being of memory results from the loss of the extended mode of being. The fact that memory conserves is generative of being and the fact that the conservation is not material means that being and knowledge become one in memory. In the words of Louis Lavelle, “pure memory is an idea stripped of the material body where it is born to subsist only in us by the act that thinks of it and which constitutes the secret of the person.”¹⁸

The other implication of stripping memory of images is that what is contracted can be decomposed and distinctly framed, a procedure that can be termed as a “reverse process.” The process achieves the actualization of memories by reviving their image appearance. As Worms explains, “their actualization consists precisely in a work of distinction: I extract from the confused mass of my past this or that memory by separating it from the others and by re-giving it the form of a perceived image.”¹⁹ Without yet analyzing in detail the work of actualization, we can say that it closely involves the living body, in particular the selective function of the brain. This involvement confirms that recollection does not consist in awakening dormant images floating somewhere. As a work of actualization, “images *are actively created or reproduced*.”²⁰ Not only does it require the function of decomposition and selection, but also of imagination by which alone what is recalled recovers an image appearance.

A major distinction follows: the distinction between pure memory and memory-image. Failure to make the distinction misses the very originality of Bergson’s theory, namely, “the ideality of memory.”²¹ The distinction acknowledges that memory manifests itself in the form of images,

but contests the conclusion that it is a storage of images. To view memory as a storage is to fall back into the theory that sees a difference in intensity rather than of nature between perception and memory. Thus, the memory that I have of an old friend cannot be reduced to any image I have of him. The recollection is a condensed notion rich with diverse thoughts and feelings that overflow the images, even though none of its contents would have come to the light of consciousness without the anchoring role of imagery. The difference of nature between perception and pure memory means that the latter has none of the pictorial characteristics of perception. In acquiring these characteristics, pure memory undergoes a “modification,” which “essentially consists in the transformation of ‘pure’ memory into ‘memory-image’.”²² The modification moves memory from the unconscious or virtual state to a conscious state. Bergson calls “realization” or “actualization” the process by which pure memory reproduces the characteristics of perception.

What the process of actualization involves is clear enough. Since images are not conserved and memory does not become actual without assuming an image appearance, what else can explain the modification but the intervention of imagination? True, memory and imagination must not be confused: as Bergson reminds us, “to picture is not to remember.”²³ Memory revives the past while imagination deals with representations that are neither real nor were given in the past. Even so, since the past is gone and images are not conserved, it must be admitted that the image appearance of memory is a recreated one, the difference with pure imagination being that in the case of memory what is imagined is the past. To quote Worms, “memory is in the true sense of the word an ‘imagination,’ that is, the process by which a past content takes the form of image.”²⁴ Without yet analyzing in detail the work of imagination by which memory is actualized, we can already say that imagining the past cannot occur without some support. Since the process provides the sensory vestment through which pure memory acquires an image form, the work of actualization needs a motor ally. The participation of a motor component is how bodily attitudes are activated and felt, thereby providing the corresponding sensations with which imagination recreates, more exactly mimics past images.

Given that we are dealing with a fluid process where distinctions easily get blurred, let us make sure that the difference between pure memory and memory-image is demarcated clearly. Most analysts of Bergson do insist on the distinction, but as they pursue their analysis,

the demarcation becomes less and less clear-cut. As a result, they tend to describe the virtual nature of pure memory in terms of image minus the vivacity, distinction, and concreteness of perceived images. Pure memory would contain memory-images but in an indistinct and unconscious fashion. Bergson seems to be suggesting this interpretation of the virtual as an image that has lost its actuality when he compares the formation of memory to the reflection of an object in a mirror. He writes, "the memory seems to be to the perception what the image reflected in the mirror is to the object in front of it."²⁵ The object is actual in that it acts and reacts; its reflected image is virtual, that is, resembles the object but is not capable of action and reaction. The comparison seems to indicate that our life "duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image" so that it is "perception on the one side and memory on the other."²⁶ This split of our life simply reasserts the already noted contemporaneity of memory with perception.

The assimilation of memory to "a mirror-image" is valid so long as we deal with the primary stage of the formation of memory, the stage where the present is both perception and memory. This duplication establishes a difference in kind. As we saw, unless the formations of memory and perception are assigned to two different and separate processes, it becomes difficult to avoid the reduction of memory to a weakened perception. Its outcome is a two-level process: the primary level of memory formation can only be a reflected image owing to its simultaneity with perception as a result of which it shares the same present and the same motor components with perception. The only difference between the two is that the reflected image is barred from conscious appearance under pain of generating false recognition. The crucial thing to keep in mind is that the reflected image is only a first stage and that the organizing and blending work of memory will integrate the reflection into the indivisible and continuous history of the perceiver. The integration is how it loses the image form to become an idea with not only a power of interpretation but also a propensity to develop into memory-images while remaining distinct from them. Indeed, the melting of reflected image into the indivisible history of the subject is the very process by which the experience of the world is molded into the knowledge of the world.

At first glance, the Bergsonian theory of memory seems to agree with the empiricist derivation of knowledge from experience. Given that experience implies repetition, it involves memory, which fixes into ideas

the repeated perceptions of the world. Where Bergson departs from empiricism is that the change of perceptions into ideas involves a work that hardly conforms with the notion of memory as a copy of perceptions. The view of memories as faint images, in addition to missing the difference in kind between perception and memory, cannot conceive their existence other than in the mode of juxtaposed and distinct spatial representations. As a result, the only way empiricism can understand reasoning and the formation of general ideas is as a mechanical association of ideas. As will be developed later, where there is an indistinct continuity, reasoning and forming general ideas require dissociation rather than association and a motor component compressing the dissociated elements and extracting their resemblance.

Contrary to the empiricist notion of association, Bergson avoids the spatial representation of the self: the self does not contain ideas, as a bag contains different objects. There is only an act, the thinking, more exactly, the self-knowing self. Diverse ideas appear only to the extent that they are cut up and actualized, and so represent different focuses and levels of condensation of the same indivisible self. In this way, the whole of memory is present within whatever is made to appear. With no literal meaning intended, we can compare the self to a blender mixing different fruits into a juice, which, though diversely composed, has nevertheless a unique taste. So conceived, the self is a qualitative notion, as noted previously, a thinking character, and not an abstract cogito or the Kantian “I think” that must “accompany all my representations.”²⁷ Now imagine the reverse process of separating the extract into its constituent elements, and you have an outcome that is comparable to the actualization of memory-images.

This Bergsonian account agrees with the rationalist view that ideas transcend perceptions. For Bergson, however, this transcendence does not indicate their innate or a prior nature in that they all originate from perceptions. What can be considered as innate is less the contents of thought than its general direction. Since action on matter propels intelligence (see Chapter 2), the tendency to spatialize and fix mobility is a natural disposition. Even so, this disposition operates with the active products of the mind understood as memory, whose contraction and expansion perform the constant movement of going from oneness to multiplicity and from multiplicity to oneness. This perpetual movement is the manner the self exists as an act, and not as an entity or a fixed substance. This constant totalizing and dispersing movement, this

back-and-forth from the pure to the diverse is how, in the admirable words of Bergson, “spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds, and restores them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom.”²⁸ The process of condensation and expansion converts the empirical, the borrowed into the rational, that is, into a prior knowledge. The journey from perceptions to memory and back to perceptions is thus reminiscence, prior knowledge by which the actions and reactions of objects becomes predictable. This predictability, in turn, allows the subject to choose, plan, and execute its actions on matter. What is pure, blind necessity in matter is returned to matter as actionable purpose.

This work of memory by which the empirical becomes knowledge sufficiently establishes that memory is not a storage of images and that the process of actualization consists in the active recreation of images. According to Gilles Deleuze, “the only equivalent thesis” to this cognitive nature of memory “is Plato’s notion of Reminiscence.”²⁹ The obvious difference with Plato is that for Bergson the acquired knowledge is the product of a personal memory, and not something contemplated before birth and forgotten thereafter. Still, the parallel between the two is discernible in light of the role of reminiscence. For Bergson, too, the perceived is constituted into knowledge by reminiscence, that is, by the movement of the past returning to the present with an interpretative capacity. Empiricism is right: the rational derives from the empirical, but this derivation requires more than the mechanical association of ideas. In its turn, rationalism is correct in positing an active mind, but this activity does not operate with ready-made tools, be they innate or a priori forms. Again, the active movement from the present to the past and back to the present is how the mind collects information from matter and returns them to matter in the form of tools that it uses to enhance its action. Accordingly, memory is like a laboratory where spirit forges concepts by the continuous act of dissociation and contraction.

DELEUZE AND BERGSON

Memory functions in a way that is comparable to perception (see Chapter 5) in that both operate by means of selection. Images, be they perceptions or memory-images, only appear as a result of acts of selection fracturing the given indivisible reality into distinct and juxtaposed parts, the given reality being materiality in the case of perception and

memory or the self in the case of memory-images. The selection effected by perception adapts the material world to the needs and practical abilities of the living body while that of memory supports its actions by converting perceptions into knowledge. The body is the node between spirit and matter, the point of juncture between two currents resulting in concrete perception. To quote Bergson, “distinct perception is brought about by two opposite currents, of which the one, centripetal, comes from the external object, and the other, centrifugal, has for its point of departure that which we term ‘pure memory’.”³⁰ The expression “opposite currents” joins the definition of reality given in Chapter 4, namely, the making of being or mind through that which is unmaking or materiality. This creation of being requires us to interpret the difference between memory and perception, that is, between the past and the present in terms of ontological distinctions.

This is what Deleuze does when he asserts that for Bergson “the past and the present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist.”³¹ Since the past is not a present that has passed because its formation is contemporary to that of the present, its relation to the present can only be one of coexistence. The term “coexistence” means that past and present are different but also that the one cannot exist without the other. Is this interpretation in line with Bergson’s thinking, notably with his repeated assertion that memory is “absolutely independent of matter”?³² Let there be no misunderstanding: Deleuze’s interpretation brings out Bergson’s originality and depth of thinking in a remarkably unique way. At the same time, it is no less true that he takes upon himself the task of adjusting Bergson each time the thinking runs into what he considers to be a pitfall. Such seems to be the case with memory. While he approves the difference in kind between perception and memory, he finds the conclusion that the difference authorizes the attribution of an independent status to personal memory unwarranted.

The Deleuzian inflection begins with the very nature of the Bergsonian notion of “pure memory.” According to Deleuze, “Bergson calls the virtual image ‘pure recollection’, the better to distinguish it from mental images—recollection-images, dream or dreaming—with which it might be readily confused.”³³ In the same vein, Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey allude to “the virtual character of pure memory and its images” and hence to “memory” being “made up of memory-images.”³⁴ While it is true that, as Deleuze says, Bergson demarcates pure memory from memory-images, the use of the term

“image” to qualify pure memory, even understood as virtual, is an interpretation that takes Bergsonism in a different direction. Although Bergson speaks of “the progress by which the virtual image realizes itself,” the expression signifies less the image attribute of memory than the manner pure recollection increasingly acquires the pronounced features of an image appearance, which appearance involves a recreative work.³⁵ The acquisition is not how what was in the dark becomes increasingly distinct, but how what is imageless gradually takes on an image appearance. As a matter of fact, unless the “unimaginable” nature of pure memory is acknowledged, Bergson’s theory becomes undistinguishable from the classical theory composing memory with faint images.³⁶ Bergson’s whole effort is to dismiss the questions of where the past is conserved and under what form as false problems because pure memory is an indistinct act and, as such, “has neither the character of image, nor the materiality associated with perception, nor the efficacy associated with action.”³⁷

Without doubt, the Bergsonian vision of our life constantly duplicating itself into actual perception and a virtual, image-mirror existence seems to backup Deleuze’s interpretation. Unless one admits the simultaneous formation of perception and memory, one has no other choice than to reduce memory to a faint perception, thereby establishing between the two a relationship of succession by overlooking their difference in kind. Despite its apparent clarity, the standard picture of time as a line, a chronological and irreversible succession of instants fails to account for the passage of time. As Deleuze asks, “how would any present whatsoever pass, if it were not past *at the same time* as present?”³⁸ Indeed, the present can never become past unless it is formed as past at the same time, since whatever happens to it to become past, such as losing vivacity, does not alter the fact that it is still present and not past. Unless the present is at the same time past, that is, produces an ontologically different duplicate, it can never become past by ceasing to be present, for the simple reason that for passing to be possible the present must simultaneously be its own past. The ephemeral nature of the present arises from the fact that it produces its own past at the same time. Without the concurrent formation of the past, what we have is a series of presents demarcated by their increasing faintness, and not by their pastness. Rather than apprehending time, such a representation gives a spatialized version of time. In other words, as Deleuze puts it, “the Bergsonian duration is, in the final analysis, defined less by succession than by coexistence.”³⁹

The consequence of this interpretation is that it makes the definition of the past in terms of virtual image unavoidable. As a mirror-image existence, pure memory or, to use another term, the past in general, is just a virtual duplicate of the perceived present and, as such, retains the character of image. Once the validity of the notion of image for the past in general is established, one would have to look for “a different sense of the image in Bergson’s work, a sense linked to virtuality” to distinguish the images of perception from those of memory.⁴⁰ And when we ask the question of knowing what this different sense of image exactly is, we are told that the virtual image is not a representation. Instead, it is “a certain power (*puissance*) which is not that of efficient causality, but of suggestion.”⁴¹ The power derives from the different levels of expansion and contraction of the whole past by which memory, thus intensified and directional, steers toward a certain region of the past to respond to the needs of the present. So that, “in the same way that we do not perceive things in ourselves, but at the place where they are, we only grasp the past at the place where it is in itself, and not in ourselves, in our present.”⁴² On the one hand there is the past in general, on the other there are various levels of expansion and condensation by which memory adjusts its focus and progressively develops its findings from a virtual, unconscious state into distinct memory-images.

The question we must examine here is whether Bergson has shifted, as Deleuze claims, from his earlier theory of duration as succession to that of coexistence, notably in *Matter and Memory*, to accommodate the idea that material things too participate in duration. The supposition that, just as in space, we grasp the past where it is and outside of ourselves, presupposes that “memory is not in us; it is we who move in a Being-memory, a world-memory.”⁴³ One admires the wild and thrilling nature of the Deleuzian interpretation, but also wonders whether there is indeed a shift in Bergson from succession to coexistence, by which alone the idea of world-memory, of our memories existing in a virtual state outside of ourselves, can be vindicated. Clearly, in positing a Being-memory, Deleuze does no more than dissolve personal memory into an impersonal duration. He reinforces this idea by saying that, as soon as Bergson admitted that the universe endures, he had no choice but to subscribe to the idea that “there is only a single time, a single duration, in which everything would participate, including our consciousnesses including living beings, including the whole material world.”⁴⁴

The problem with this interpretation is not so much its defense of a monism of time as the eclipse of the creative nature of Bergsonian duration. Real, ontological creation becomes harder to think if duration is defined by coexistence rather than succession. As explained in the previous chapters, the succession of duration has nothing to do with a juxtaposing linearity; it is a continuity of interpenetration and fusion resulting in qualitative changes. The passing nature of time is caused by the continuous fusion altering the present: time passes not because things cease to be, but because they constantly change. The fleeting nature of the present is due to its perpetual renovation through the prolongation of the past into the present. The latter is always new because it is the present of a changing continuity. Rather than coexisting with the present, the past thus alters the present through a cumulative movement so that, in the words of Bergson, duration is “a continual winding, like that of thread into a ball, for our past follows us, becoming larger and larger with the present it picks up on its way; and consciousness means memory.”⁴⁵ If consciousness is memory, does it not mean that memory is in us, as opposed to the duration of the world, which, unable to reach the level of condensation of memory, is reduced to extensity? This active and continuous involvement of memory in the renewal of the present is certainly not thinkable in terms of coexistence. Instead, it denotes a synthetic, condensed process by which all that is distinct and image is ground, so to speak, into the self-consciousness of an evolving and qualitatively defined being, that is, a consciousness in the making by the very act of rolling the passing present. Everything happens as though the living body extracts images from materiality through the selective property of perception and duration forges them into a self-conscious being through its condensing and blending attribute. Duration is not so much the passage of things as the crucible where being is made through a being that is unmade.

Far-reaching consequences follow from duration understood as a rolling process, starting with the attribute that such a process never passes in that it changes without passing. It is always a totality that remains present, but in a present that endures. As analyzed in Chapter 3, duration is a continuous, “perpetual present,” a present that never finishes, or “a present which endures.”⁴⁶ But then, in this enduring present, as opposed to the passing present, there is really no place for what is called the past. I am quite aware that the past as a concept frequently appears in Bergson’s books. But the whole point is to know whether the use of the

term has a cognitive or an ontological meaning, whether it has to do with representation or designates a modality of being. As Bergson notes, we are faced with the question of where memories are stored because we think of the present as that which ceases to be. As a result, we lose sight of the simple fact that the past is preserved because it has never passed. Since we understand time as a discontinuous process by which what is now present disappears, we cannot but ask the question of the conservation of the past when that which was presumed gone reappears in the form of memory-images. But a distinct act of conservation is unnecessary if what is supposed to have passed belongs to “a duration which is drawn out, wherein the past is preserved indivisible.”⁴⁷

The right question to ask is not how and where the past is conserved, but why our whole life is not present. The question brings out the function of forgetting, as discussed in the first part of this chapter. Because of the orientation of our consciousness, whatever is not practical and useful slips into the past, which simply means the unconscious, and not the part of our life that is ontologically erased. The unconscious is the ineffective, that is, that which does not appear or cannot continue to appear because it is no longer animated by the living body. Consequently, all our life is not present to us, not because what is not present is no longer or falls into a different realm of being than that of our consciousness, but because the scope of our consciousness always narrows to the present condition and needs of the body. Contrary to the Deleuzian interpretation, the difference between the past, the unconscious, and the conscious present is not ontological: it is a distinction between the practical and useful and that which has lost practical interest. To be specific, the only difference between the conscious and the unconscious parts is that the conscious part still operates with the spatial determinations of images being distinct and juxtaposed, while in the unconscious all these material characteristics are lost in favor of the indivisible and synthetic notion of the self. Some such difference cannot be labeled as ontological, since the Bergsonian unconscious is simply the part of consciousness that has ceased to be practically relevant. That is why the term “leap” that Deleuze uses to signify that we grasp the past by going outside ourselves should be understood in a less radical manner: it is more about navigating in the entangled moments of our indistinct history than of going out of our consciousness.⁴⁸

It is consistent with the practical orientation of our consciousness that the forgotten resurfaces in the form of memory-images when it regains

some practical interest for the living body and finds a motor support liable to activate it. Its unsolicited reappearance as image-representations to conform to perception would not only be useless, but would also be detrimental to the practical orientation of consciousness. It is as though life transforms the past into a phantom to tie us even more firmly to the life of the body. In reappearing as memory-images, images wear the mark of the past because it is as past that they assume the function of knowledge by becoming experience. In adopting the representational form of past moments, memory moves toward the present, thereby fulfilling the function of recognition. When what is comes back as having been, it becomes reminiscence, that is, not what is present, but what interprets the present. Accordingly, the past as a concept does not denote anything real; it is an intellectual construct, as is the case with space, by which we fracture and diversely organize the indivisible continuity of duration to fashion it into experience.

To integrate consciousness into memory is to recognize Bergson's effort to endow consciousness with a dynamic substantiality of its own based on its continuity. The continuity of consciousness is jeopardized if the past in general is a separate ontological entity, and not the totality of interpenetrating individual memories. Since the notion of coexistence ontologizes separately the past and juxtaposes it to the present, it fails to account for another important characteristic of Bergsonian memory, namely, its eagerness for reincarnation, that is, for psychological manifestation. Surely, it is not clear why an ontologically self-sufficient entity would crave for actualization. Yet, Bergson speaks of "memories which spontaneously go to meet the perception."⁴⁹ Challenging the idea of coexistence, Mael Renouard does not see why the Bergsonian assertion that memory is saved nowhere should lead to the conclusion that it is ontologically distinct from consciousness. "True, he [Bergson] defines the past by a mode of existence that is proper to it," but this does not mean that the past "is being," Renouard writes.⁵⁰ The fact that memory is conserved by itself does not entail that it is a separate entity: the virtual is not a being, but a state of consciousness. Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron goes further and explores the real motive of the Deleuzian separate ontologization of memory. It is not that Deleuze overlooks that Bergson has made sufficiently clear that consciousness signifies primarily memory. Nor is it likely that he missed that memory constitutes the substance of the self for Bergson. While it is true that consciousness is impersonal at the level of pure perception, it is equally undeniable that it is

personalized at the level of memory. When putting aside the oneness of memory with consciousness, Deleuze interprets memory as “an impersonal transcendental field, non-subjective and unconscious, he is certainly not Bergsonian ... for there is nothing more personal than memory.”⁵¹ Instead, what Deleuze provides is a “structuralist” reading ratifying the elimination of the subject.⁵²

The critical question is whether an independent memory is the only way to establish the difference in kind between perception and memory on a firm basis. As already argued, the difference retains its ontological nature if it originates not so much from a separate existence of memory as from the practical orientation of consciousness. Since forgetting, not conservation, is what needs to be explained, practical consciousness is just memory riveted to the life of the body. This practicality means that consciousness is confined to operate at the level of perception, whose consequence is that it always finds itself in a sphere of existence that is external to its own being. This is illustrated by the fact that its own being appears not only as its past, as the already gone, but also any representation of this present-past, so to speak, takes the form of memory-image. Accordingly, the difference in kind between perception and memory is ascribable to the fundamental law of our psychological life, namely, attention to life.

INTENTIONALITY AND THE CONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In reasserting the personal nature of memory by defying Deleuze’s interpretation, are we not erasing the very originality separating Bergson’s theory from classical theories of memory? If anything, it is the bold idea of a being of the past, according to Deleuze, that enables Bergson to establish a difference in kind between perception and memory. Interestingly, critics who reject the notion of world-memory in favor of the personal nature of Bergsonian memory see a path to a rapprochement between Bergson and phenomenology. Thus, Michael R. Kelly argues that Bergson is actually closer to Husserl than Deleuze’s reading of Bergsonism suggests. Kelly writes:

Like Bergson, Husserl (i) locates the ‘existence’ of the past in the life of consciousness ... insofar as the past in general amounts to the realm of ‘my recollections in their totality’... and (ii) employs the metaphor of the leap to describe consciousness’ access to the past. Taken on Bergson’s terms rather than Bergsonism’s reading, Husserl could accept each of these claims.⁵³

Referring to the attacks of phenomenologists against the idea of a being of the past, Kelly admits that Deleuze's rebuttal "seems justified," but only with regard to Husserl's early theory of time-consciousness.⁵⁴ The truth is that Husserl has revised his position, expressly to ward off the danger of turning the past into a weak present. He did so by granting consciousness a "double-life," thereby avoiding the origination of the past from the present and endowing consciousness with an original sense of the past as past.⁵⁵ The consequence is that, as in Bergson, perception and retention become contemporaneous acts, and this dismisses for good any ambiguity over Husserl's acceptance of the distinct nature of the past.

For his part, without denying the insurmountable gap existing between Bergson's and Husserl's conceptions of temporality, Jean-Michel Salanskis detects "a common object: the continuity of the mental process."⁵⁶ For both Bergson and Husserl, the flux of the lived is essential to consciousness and constitutive of the individuality of its moments. Rafael Winkler pushes this idea further by arguing that Husserl's theory of retention has a function similar to the Bergsonian duration, which is to generate a time continuum. Citing Husserl, Winkler writes, "retention ensures that every now expands into a duration. The present is 'a continuity, and one constantly expanding, a continuity of pasts.' And yet this indivisible continuity 'is engaged in continuous alteration'."⁵⁷ Undoubtedly, this idea of an indivisible and changing continuity strikingly parallels Bergson's analysis of duration. It follows that memory, whether called pure memory or retention, is an act—the act of continuity—and not a storage of things.

Those critics who see the possibility of rapprochement between phenomenology and Bergsonism do so because they believe that the Deleuzian allegation of a being of the past is an exaggeration of Bergson's position. To them, the Bergsonian memory remains a psychological reality. Its difference with classical theories is not that memory resides outside consciousness, but that the formation of its content is assigned to a process that accounts for the difference in kind between the past and the present. As a matter of fact, Miklos Vetö argues that Husserl arrives at an understanding of the past that is comparable to Bergson's view thanks to his theory of retention. Unlike the conservation of the past in the form of a less vivid present, retention preserves the past in a different form than the present, to wit, as past. In addition to conserving the continuity between past and present in a way reminiscent of Bergson's idea of duration, retention "denotes the subsistence of

a past representation in the present, but precisely as past. Retention does justice to the origination of the past: a past perception exists in itself, but it exists as past.”⁵⁸ Just as retention establishes both the continuity of psychological life and the originality of the past without postulating a world-memory, neither is it necessary to place the Bergsonian memory outside of consciousness to justify the difference in kind between the past and the present.

Let us go further. According to Winkler, both Husserl and Bergson say that the difference in kind between the past and the present involves different types of consciousness. Winkler writes: “for Husserl, as for Bergson, there is a difference in kind between ‘presentation’ and ‘re-presentation,’ between concrete perception and recollection.”⁵⁹ For Bergson, perception presents things where they are, that is, outside of our consciousness while memory-images are representations in that they are subjective and relate with the past of consciousness itself. For Husserl, too, there is the intentional object of perception that aims at an external object and there is the intentional act of memory, which is not about the object, but about the intentional act that aimed at the object. Moreover, for both of them, the way the past connects with consciousness does not involve images or signs. As is the case with Bergson’s notion of pure memory, Husserl’s “retention is not a reproduction of the past.”⁶⁰ Being something present, an image or a sign cannot by definition signify the past, that which is no more. Any mediation of the past by something present would simply obstruct the immediate intuition of the past as past. The conservation must be then in the form of idea or intent and, whatever images are used to bring the idea into the present, they must be a product of imagination rather than a revival of saved images of the past.

Disputing Deleuze’s charge against the failure of phenomenology to demarcate in kind the past from the present by showing that retention is not a past-present, but the very continuity of consciousness, is certainly a defensible project. However, a too close rapprochement runs the risk of losing sight of the irreconcilable chasm separating the two philosophical systems. Any rapprochement between Bergsonism and phenomenology faces two crucial issues: (1) whether the continuity of retention and that of duration are really matching notions; and (2) whether retention can provide the ground for a distinction in kind between the past and the present.

We begin with the second issue. Granted that phenomenology, like Bergson, rejects the idea of the conservation of the past by means of traces left in the present, there remains the question of knowing whether

retention can truly account for the original nature of the past. So long as the past preserves the present, there is no avoiding the fact that what is retained is a past-present. Since what is retained is the perceived, albeit in another form, the act of retaining the present cannot yield a difference in nature between perception and memory. Even if one follows Kelly's reading, can we say that phenomenology really goes to the extent of asserting the simultaneous formation of perception and memory? The point is that one does not quite see how the past can be anything other than a passed present if its formation is consecutive to perception. What enables Bergson to overcome a sequential relation between the past and the present is the direction of duration, to wit, the fact that it moves from the past to the present, and not, as is often assumed about time, including by phenomenology, from the present to the past. It is because the direction of duration is cumulative that it is properly defined as a perpetually changing present, as opposed to the view of time based on the notion of passing, fleeting present. The simultaneous formation of perception and memory stems from this movement of duration from the past to the present. The movement gathers and fuses the instantaneous sections or perceptions operated by our body into an indivisible continuity or thinking self. In short, what is given one after another is being wound at the same time.

Though Bergson and phenomenology seem to be in agreement on the issue of continuity, the direction of Bergsonian duration shows that they substantially diverge on the question of what exactly constitutes the continuity of consciousness. For Husserl, the continuity is due to retention and protention, which are intentional acts respectively directed at the past and the future. In implicating a different act of consciousness for the constitution of the past, Husserl ascertains that recollection is "a fundamentally new kind of consciousness, distinct from perception," thereby vigorously dismissing the idea of the past as a weak copy of the present.⁶¹ Still, not only does the attribution of perception and recollection to two different acts of consciousness fail to define the past in terms other than a former present, but it also subordinates the past to the present, since the "survival" of the past "is owed to the force of the new present that intends and retains it."⁶² What is more, retention cannot but align the moments of the past in a linear succession. This assimilation of the passage and continuity of time to a spatial representation juxtaposing past moments is nowhere near to the idea of continuity conceived as the fusion of moments into one another.

We touch here on the core difference between Bergson and phenomenology. As already underlined, Bergson's pure memory is a self-knowing act synthesizing oneness with multiplicity and so yielding a sense of identity indistinguishably blended with its own history. It is altogether an act, an intention and a being in the making, a stretching and changing present. For this being, only the point where action takes place is conscious; the rest, the already-made, is unconscious and represented as past, which is just a function of forgetting. In this way, the focus is on the being-made whose instrument is the living body. As a condensed present, the point of focus contains all the past, but as an indivisible and rolling present. It is not that the past is a being in itself, as Deleuze argues, but that the present is a rolling process and that the part not useful for the pending action is removed from the realm of conscious appearance. This removal is represented as the past, which signifies not a distinct being, but the contraction of consciousness itself. It is important to understand that, for Bergson, there is no distinction between the act of being, on the one hand, and, on the other, the act of being consciousness of. The self is the very act of being and of being conscious at the same time: this coincidence between being and consciousness is what Bergson calls intuition (see Chapter 2).

These clarifications underscore the error of those critics who consider temporality as a bridge between Husserl and Bergson. Retention and the resulting continuity are both psychological acts, whereas duration is an ontological process, the activity of the being-made. Duration does not just retain; it prolongs and fuses its moments, thereby causing a snowball effect. Only through the process of recall by which the already-made is represented for the purpose of action does it appear as the retained has-been. As previously noted, the appearance in the form of a has-been is exactly how the world becomes familiar and predictable, that is, experience. Pinpointing the exact line of demarcation, Ansell-Pearson notes that "phenomenology separates itself from Bergsonism precisely on the question of time, replacing a flowing time in consciousness with a consciousness that constitutes time."⁶³ The Bergsonian continuity is not intentionality; it is both act and content, being and consciousness of its being, in a word, coincidence or intuition. When consciousness remains within itself, it apprehends itself, not in the mode of consciousness of something, but in the affective mode of feeling itself from inside. What the affective mode grasps is none other than the *élan*, the creative force of life, but personalized as the autonomous and conscious self. As we

saw, the duration of the self, as that of the *élan* itself, is a rolling and differentiating movement from the past to the present.

To sum up, the alleged affinity between retention and duration ignores that the psychological is reflective of the ontological in the case of Bergson. However, this does not mean that Deleuze's characterization of the past as a being in itself is the correct reading. In agreement with Husserl, what Bergson calls the past in general is a representation, not a being, a world-memory. The fact that it is unconscious does not denote a being outside consciousness; it is rather the effect of the psychological act of forgetting, or of being focused on the life of the body. On the other hand, neither is the Bergsonian unconscious reducible to a psychological act. It is an ontological reality existing, not as the being of the past, but as the enduring and changing present of consciousness. In this case, the unconscious can be said to be the past but understood as what is not represented due to the lack of utility, and not as what is no more. The Bergsonian unconscious is not outside of consciousness: it is consciousness itself narrowing its scope to the life of the body and its surroundings. By contrast, Husserl refuses the notion of the unconscious contents because it "would imply that there are 'experiences' beyond the intentional reach of consciousness."⁶⁴ In refusing the reality of the unconscious, Husserl has no other choice than to reduce the past to a psychological act, whereas for Bergson the same psychological act reveals a reality that has been simply removed for the actual concern of consciousness. As a result, Husserlian retention is dependent on the present and what is retained is just an elapsed present. Not so with Bergson, who establishes a difference in kind between the passing present and the enduring and changing ontological present. This swelling present takes the psychological form of the past to make itself available for the creative forefront of consciousness, as illustrated by the famous inverted cone in *Matter and Memory*.

THE ACTUALIZATION OF MEMORY

Since we have ascertained the nature of pure memory as an imageless indistinct continuity, the remaining pressing question is to know how that which is imageless actualizes itself in the form of memory-images, how the ontological takes on a psychological vestment. The question becomes all the more complex since we exclude the possibility for anything present to express the past without canceling its pastness.

The answer to the question must begin by recognizing that memory-images are quite different from the images of perception. As pointed out already, not only are memory-images marked by the seal of the past, but they also have no tangibility. They have the appearances of images of perception without their reality, the consequence of which is that memory-images do not lend themselves to real observation resulting in some new discovery. As Sartre puts it, they “are not sensible, but rather quasi-sensible things.”⁶⁵ What defines them is not so much lack in vivacity as a ghostly appearance hinting that their image form is a borrowed dress. Another thing to keep in mind is that the issue is about recalling the past; it is not about conservation, since conservation is just the act of duration. In light of the fact that images are not conserved, the obvious way out is to appeal once again to the idea of recreation. In the words of Jean Hyppolite, “memory [*le souvenir pur*] is not an image; it becomes an image only in the effort by which we bring it about, or, by which we, so to speak, recreate it.”⁶⁶

The notion of borrowed dressing suggests that the past, without identifying with anything in the present, uses some mechanism to assume an image appearance, the only way by which it can have access to the conscious part of the mind and participate in practical life. Without imagery, memory is just “a mute contemplation,” to borrow Hyppolite’s expression, as when people say, “I have it on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t remember it.”⁶⁷ The mechanism must be a motor device: it activates the internal sensations needed to dress up the past owing to the fact that the living body is felt from inside. The coordination of sensations with movements defines the present as sensorimotor and suggests that the sensations occasioned by bodily movements provide the sensible ingredients enabling pure memory to put on an image appearance. This coordination is the very function of the brain, the function by which useful memories are allowed into consciousness while the rest is kept unconscious. As a rule, the determination by utility must select memories that bear some resemblance to an actual perception, thereby activating recognition. Accordingly, “the brain contributes to the recall of the useful recollection, but still more to the provisional banishment of all the others.”⁶⁸ In other words, the brain is necessary, not to preserve memory, but to select relevant pieces of information and actualize them into memory-images.

The coordination can result in actual actions or in actions that are simply simulated. In this last case, we have what Bergson calls “nascent

actions,” that is, actions begun but not executed. These mimicked actions sketch bodily attitudes that are felt and these affects provide the stuff for the imaginative recreation of attendant images. Nascent actions inspire the imaginative recreation of elapsed images by eliciting impressions anticipating the outlines of executed movements. Obviously, the impressions result from a reset of coordinated movements. The latter fall short of actual executions but are sketchy enough to evoke sensations associated with past actions and movements. As such, they lend the life-blood necessary for relevant information of pure memory to access consciousness by actualizing as memory-images. As Bergson puts it, “it is from the present that comes the appeal to which memory responds, and it is from the sensori-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life.”⁶⁹

We recognize here Bergson’s famous distinction between two kinds of memory: the one essentially spiritual or representational, the other habit or motor memory situated in the brain. Habit-memory repeats and this function derives from the nature of matter as “as a present which is always beginning again.”⁷⁰ It acts the past in that it preserves the past but in the form of acquired motor dispositions. These mechanisms are given in the present and account for the automatic recognition of familiar objects and environments. As stored motor reactions to a multitude of stimuli, they retain of objects not so much their individuality as their resemblance in terms of the actions they solicit or provoke. They thus retain of objects motor equivalents, which are abstracts or sketches, the triggering of which produces the sentiment of familiarity. Different is image or spiritual memory: it does not act the past, it imagines it. It registers the unfolding of a personal life with its individual and lived events and totalizes them into the indivisible sense of self. It does not preserve images, but the thoughts and feelings occasioned by the perception of images. In being imageless, it is like a form without content, and so retains the past in the form of “intention, which is what we call the pure memory,” says Bergson.⁷¹

An intention aspires after its completion, namely, image appearance, which is also how it becomes conscious. By inserting into the sensations evoked by motor dispositions, what was pure intention is actualized, relived in the form of memory-images. When intention reflects on the sensations awakened by nascent actions, it imagines the past, specifically reconstitutes it from the sensuous emanations occasioned by the mimicked actions. Clearly, recollection does not revive a stored copy of

a perceived object or lived event; rather, it provokes its imaginary, hallucinatory appearance. "As the hypnotizer is behind the hallucination he provokes," so too memory assumes a sensuous vestment by inserting into the activated sensorimotor apparatus.⁷² The process of actualization thus rests on the coordination between the two memories. For useful memories to be actualized, the body must be capable of simulating its past actions in the present. Without these simulations in the form of nascent actions, memory would not be able to respond with the relevant past experience or knowledge. In sum, in addition to allowing the imaginative recreation of the past, cerebral pantomimes enable memory to respond to the needs of the present.

Bergson's theory of the actualization of memory gains in clarity when it is contrasted with Sartre's analysis of mental imagery. The contrast is all the more instructive in view of Sartre's harsh and unfair criticisms of Bergson's theory. As we saw, Sartre accuses Bergson of filling memory with inert and opaque images. The consequence is that, as is the case with the classical theory, he fails to establish a difference in kind between memory and perception. Needless to say, the absence of intentionality explains, according to Sartre, Bergson's realism, namely, his conception of memory as a storage of images. Sartre's criticisms obviously overlook Bergson's derivation of a difference in kind between memory and perception from their simultaneous formation. Moreover, as noted in our critical review of phenomenology, what Sartre misses is that the attribution of different intentional acts is not enough to ascertain a difference in kind between memory and perception. Unless the difference in kind is backed by an ontological distinction, mere subjectively different intentional acts do not remove the fact that the so-called past is just a previous present. Lastly, even though Bergson consistently attributes the formation of memory-image to the specific act of actualization, Sartre remains convinced that the image is not an act but a thing. Because of this incorrect reading, he fails to see that actualization, understood as an act, sufficiently indicates that memory is not composed of saved images. After the act, images do not survive: they must be recreated, actualized again.

Ironically, even as Sartre denounces Bergson's realism, his own theory cannot escape a similar criticism unless it adopts a Bergsonian formulation. I am referring to his theory of image formation. Since both memory and imagination involve imagery, Sartre is confronted with the difficult task of accounting for the formation of images while avoiding the risk of turning them into things. So, he comes up with the notion of

“mental analogon,” which he says is not a thing, but how consciousness aims at an object that is absent.⁷³ As the manner objects are intended as absent, analogons assume the sensible qualities of objects, minus their reality. Sartre admits that even if mental images are not physical, they must have some material to accomplish their analogizing function. Recognizing the difficulty of identifying their status, he says that the analogon uses “certain matter,” but “the matter of the mental image is ... difficult to determine.”⁷⁴

For critics, though Sartre condemns Bergson and other philosophers for stuffing consciousness with images, his own appeal to the notion of mental analogon is but a relapse of the whole theory into realism. For example, Edward S. Casey does not see how the theory avoids reification, since the “analogon is said expressly not only to exist, but to be ‘interposed’ between the act of imagining and the ultimate (that is, absent or non-exist) object of this act.”⁷⁵ It is of no use to argue that the analogon does not possess sensible qualities, for “if it does not exhibit qualities that are either sensible or quasi-sensible, how could it function as an analogon of an object that displays genuine sensible qualities?”⁷⁶ The surprise here is that Sartre’s followers, concerned by unanswered questions, push the theory, without realizing it, in the direction of the Bergsonian account of the formation of image. For instance, taking into account that the analogon is not an object and does not have objective characteristics, Cam Clayton suggests that it can function as an equivalent if we define “the psychical analogon in terms of the embodied materiality of past subjectivity rather than as the retention of an originary, objective presence.”⁷⁷ This means that the analogon possesses some reality by way of the body, henceforth conceived as “embodied past.”⁷⁸ Moreover, the revival could be due to the fact that “perhaps the same neural pathways [as those of perceptions] are fired.”⁷⁹ What else is this explanation but an appeal to Bergson’s habit-memory, which is indeed both the embodiment of past actions and the source of sensations that serve as material for the imaginative recreation of images from the past?

Helena De Preester proposes a similar reformulation of Sartre’s theory, even though she does not mention Bergson in her article. Her main concern is to remove the deficiency of phenomenology in the explanation of mental imagery by appealing to the sensorimotor theory, notably, to its finding that “imagining or visualizing is dependent on the so-called sensorimotor laws.”⁸⁰ The finding establishes two points: (1) there is a correlation between bodily movements and the sensory

aspect of imagery; and (2) the mere simulation of movements is enough to produce the mental visualization of the object sketched by the movements. Thus, the simulation of the muscular movements involved in the driving of a car is sufficient to produce the mental vision of a car. Imagery is, therefore, a product of “perceptual anticipations” initiated by bodily simulations.⁸¹

The suggested amendment to the phenomenological theory of image squarely validates the role that Bergson assigns to nascent actions; it also confirms that the dependence of actualization on bodily movements is how memory becomes useful. The simulation of bodily movements enables the mind to anticipate and imagine, that is, actualize those aspects of the past that can be useful to present actions. We can even go further. The activation of a motor component from inside by an idea, and not by an externally given object, as is the case with perception, supports Sartre’s description of images as quasi-sensible things. The recreated image is indeed an equivalent, an analogon, or as Bergson describes it, a “kind of hallucination,” and not a stored copy of a previously perceived object.⁸² The crucial difference with the hallucinatory nature of dreams is that the recreation results from inserting the idea into a sensorimotor framework activated by an actual action.

The dependence of the actualization of memory on the sensorimotor apparatus posits that memory diseases are caused by a disconnection between the apparatus and pure memory. The inability to be ballasted with the sensuous sparkle triggered by nascent actions maintains pure memory in an unconscious state. Contrary to the prevailing view, the diseases are not caused by the erasure of memories, but by lesions of the sensorimotor system and the subsequent loss of communication between memory and the present reality. The attribution of memory diseases to an interruption preventing actualization disavows the materialist thesis making the brain into an organ of representation on the grounds that lesions of specific parts of the brain cause the disappearance of specific groups of memories. The observation is correct, not the interpretation. The lesions do not delete the memories; they simply interrupt communication with the corresponding sensorimotor elements, thereby blocking their actualization. The noted relations establish a correlation between brain activities and the actualization of memory, but they do not imply that memory is a function of the brain.

The explanation of actualization as an outcome of the collaboration between two kinds of memory is incomplete without the elucidation of

the process by which representative memory inserts into the sensorimotor system. Drawing on the fact that the cumulative process of duration goes from the past to the present rather than from the present to the past, Bergson distinguishes two different but simultaneous movements by which memory converges on the present. One is a movement of “translation, by which it moves in its entirety to meet experience”; the other is “rotation upon itself, by which it turns towards the situation of the moment, presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be the most useful.”⁸³ Translation is a movement of contraction enabling memory to advance toward and enter undivided into the narrow scope of the present. The levels of contraction vary depending on the needs of the moment, that is, on the range of experience needed to better define the given situation. This varying process of contraction is simultaneously a movement of rotation of memory on itself since it is by presenting a face gathering and exhibiting the needed information that it can align with the needs of the present. Needless to say, translation and rotation are just metaphors designed to express in the language of representation the dynamic adjustment of memory (otherwise known as the unity of mind and body) to the needs of the body and practical life.

One other characteristic and major outcome of the collaboration of habit-memory and representative memory is the formation of general ideas. If anything, what the impasse of the protracted debate between nominalism and conceptualism shows is the untenability of a one-sided approach. For nominalism, the general term is just a name under which we gather distinct and independent things: only these individual things exist and the gathering has no other meaning than convenience. Conceptualism retorts by arguing that the general idea is not a mere convenient term; it expresses a common nature to various things. As a common nature, it is an existing universal in which individual things partake and from which they get their resemblance. The problem here is that to generalize, we must first abstract or isolate the common nature. However, for the isolated quality to cease to be an individual feature, it must be already thought as general. For instance, the idea of fruit that I extract from an individual fruit, say, an apple, is still the quality of an apple. To extend to other fruits, the quality must develop into resemblance, a change that remains unexplained. Neither abstraction nor generalization can yield a general notion if both are supposed to start from the individuality of things. Accordingly, the deadlock disappears if we start, not from perceived individuality, but “from a confused sense

of the *striking quality* or of resemblance: this sense equally remote from generality fully conceived and from individuality clearly perceived, begets them both by a process of dissociation.”⁸⁴

The origin of this felt resemblance is not hard to determine in view of the function of motor memory. The motor scheme effects generalization since it responds with similar bodily attitudes to different things, thereby releasing a felt sense of resemblance. “It is grass in general which attracts the herbivorous animal,” says Bergson.⁸⁵ In the same way, when I refer to a pen, the same bodily attitude connected with writing is activated regardless of the particular nature of the pen. While the motor scheme generalizes, representative memory, assisted by the generality of the motor framework, directs at the same time various fitting memory-images toward the scheme. This insertion of distinction is how the similarity that is first felt is distinctly conceived. Therefore, thanks to different images, the felt generality of the pen is grasped as a general idea by subsuming pens with different colors, sizes, and shapes. The collaboration of image memory and motor memory thus provides the two characteristics of a general idea that conceptualism and nominalism wrongly separate, namely, extension and intension. Without motor memory, similarity would not be extracted from the individuality of things; without the memory of images, the extension by which the concept groups distinct things would not be conceived.

To sum up all that has been said so far by the help of an image, let us say that the unity of the self is what white light is to the spectrum. Bergson calls this unity the past in general, in the language of representation, and pure memory when it is apprehended intuitively. The use of prism disperses white light into its constituent parts, that is, into the various colors of the spectrum. It is not unwarranted to say that the prism accomplishes the function of the sensorimotor system, so that memory-images are to pure memory what the various colors are to white light. However, there is a major difference between a prism and the brain: the prism separates the contents by bending differently the different wavelengths, thereby splitting what is fused in white light. By contrast, the collaboration between pure memory and the sensorimotor system results in the active generation of memory-images, which are different from perceived images in that they are simply imagined. The process is not a separation of what is already there, but an actualization giving an image appearance by which alone an intent or idea can enter the realm of consciousness. While the former gives a distinct appearance by splitting

a blended phenomenon, actualization is an active generation of images that involves the act of imagination. As such, the images do not exist outside the subject and constitute a different sort of images than perceived ones.

ON THE UNITY OF MIND AND BODY

The collaboration between representative memory and motor memory provides an effective clue to the central and recurrent problem of philosophy, namely, the union of mind and body. After conceiving of mind and body as two different substances, Cartesian dualism faced the difficult question of explaining how one can act on the other. Parallelism and materialism attempted to overcome the difficulty in two different ways. The first proposed the theory that mind and body are two different translations of the same thing, while materialism resorted to reducing the mind to an epiphenomenon, a byproduct of the brain. These two solutions face the similar problem of assigning a specific role to the mind. Designed to repudiate the Cartesian idea of causal relation, parallelism replaces interaction by the idea of mental and physical processes occurring in parallel. The proposed solution establishes an equivalence between cerebral and mental processes, whose consequence is that neither has a specific function. The expression of the same thing in two different languages that do not interact amounts to a useless duplication. As to materialism, the principal and determining role goes to the physical: not only are mental phenomena caused by cerebral processes, but also the reverse is never true. Devoid of any causal impact, mental phenomena just accompany cerebral phenomena without contributing any action of their own.

For Bergson, the fact that the actualization of memory needs a motor accompaniment suggests a union based on a close collaboration between mind and body. To the extent that the idea of collaboration implies that mind and body contribute different but complementary roles, it goes counter to the views of both materialism and parallelism while significantly attenuating the difficulty of dualism. Indeed, as already stated, memory diseases do not prove that memories are erased, but that a motor ally is necessary for their actualization. More importantly, the collaborative approach discloses the positive function of forgetting, namely, the limitation of the mind for the sake of practical life. This approach avoids the problem of dualism because the relationship between mind

and body is not posed in causal terms but in terms of limitation resulting in a relationship of solidarity. The latter operates by self-adjustment rather than causation, as illustrated by the movements of translation and rotation on itself of memory. Moreover, in addition to indicating, contrary to parallelism, that there is no equivalence between the mental and the cerebral, limitation shows that forgetting is at the same time a mechanism of selection allowing useful memories into conscious appearance.

To say that the union of mind and body is neither causal, be it in the dualist sense of interaction or the one-sided causality of materialism, nor the product of a matching correspondence between mind and body, as theorized by parallelism, constitutes an unmistakable shift in thinking. The shift proposes a solidary union resulting from the synchronization between two different directions, one of which, the body, serves as the anchor keeping the other focused on active life. To speak of different directions does not suggest any parallelism, since it is not about saying that the same thing occurs in two different languages, but acknowledging a partnership with dissimilar contributions. Nor does it appeal to an interaction of the dualistic type in view of the fact that representative memory converges on the active present and this convergence is how it limits itself. With this movement of convergence, the contributions of each associate coalesce without anything being a cause or caused. The adjustment resulting from the limitation is a constant work. As shown by insanity and dreams, it is not a condition given once and for all. In both cases, there is disequilibrium, which in the case of insanity is due to a malfunctioning in the cerebral part, and in the case of dreams is due to the interpretative work of memory functioning in a body that is provisionally cut off from reality.

To determine with greater precision the relationship between mind and body, I can think of no better notion than overdetermination. The notion is the very one that Bergson illustrates by the image of the inverted cone. In the image, the apex intersecting with the plane represents the present or the body; the cone symbolizes the various levels of expansion and contraction of pure memory. In moving down the cone, memory inserts itself undivided into the present, thereby overdetermining it. In other words, there is never equivalence between the cerebral and the mental, as stipulated by parallelism. There is just an adjustment of an incomparably richer content to a limited field. Likewise, the failure of dualism to explain how a causal connection is possible between two different substances is overcome if the whole operation simply amounts

to the mind narrowing itself to adjust to the needs of the body. As the adjustment is obtained through the indivisible act of condensation of pure memory, the operation achieves coordination without equivalence or causal connection. Accordingly, there is always more than what the actual present of the body is displaying, and this “more” is the idea, the extract that the movement of memory condensing all relevant information projects on the living present. As condensed experience, memory becomes meaning and interprets the present. Thus, the perception of a chair is not only image; it is an overdetermined image, a condensed notion as a result of memory projecting on the image the essence of table, which is an extract of all relevant information. The extract is none other than the resemblance that emanates from the projection of a multitude of memory-images fitting into the image. A similar thing happens with words: a word conveys different meanings, not because it contains them, but because the point of insertion it offers compels memory to condense and arrange relevant information in layers. The condensed is a thought operating in a way comparable to the Kantian notion of form organizing a content, minus the apriority. As Bergson writes, “any memory-image that is capable of interpreting our actual perception inserts itself so thoroughly into it that we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory.”⁸⁶ One must bear in mind that the selection of memory-images is not a mysterious operation. Only those memories that can associate with the sensorimotor state of the body can pass into the realm of consciousness by acquiring an image appearance.

This circuit between representative memory and the living body confirms that the notion of limitation, as stated early in this chapter, goes a long way in attenuating dualism. In previous chapters, it was argued that limitation is generative of intensity, which intensity provides the transition from materiality to consciousness via the living body. Through its needs and mobility, the living body gives focus to what is in state of diffusion or unconsciousness in materiality. This primitive state of indistinction or monism indicates that the function of the brain is not to produce anything mental; rather, it is to limit the mental to the life of the body. Despite its apparent negative connotation, this limitation plays an eminently positive role, since it intensifies, condenses what is diffused. In so doing, it centers and focuses it, and provides it with intentionality, to use a phenomenological term. The generation of tension is the process by which quantity translates into quality and extension into intension. Because tension remains in a loose state in materiality, matter

extends and exposes divisible parts that exclude each other. In spirit, the tension is such that the contents, instead of spreading, interpenetrate to the point of inextension. In opposition to the loose unity of matter, spirit is “that which has its center in itself,” to borrow a Hegelian expression.⁸⁷ In a reality differentiated into extension and inextension, there is still duality, but it is not a duality of substances, since mind and body are qualitative differentiations of the same substance. This original oneness is the basis enabling mind and body to join and work together as two different but complementary functions. Limitation through condensation and rotation on itself keeps memory undivided while giving it the pointed shape by which it inserts into the motor mechanism of the body. Thanks to this insertion, the present loses its character of necessary actions and reactions and becomes “ideomotor,” that is, a mechanism permeated with knowledge.⁸⁸

Conceived as tensional difference, the issue of the unity of mind and body moves from a question of substance to that of movement. Dualism mistakenly tries to unite two entities that it previously had radically separated. The attempt fails to think in terms of movement, of memory limiting itself to converge on the present. Inasmuch as the convergence is a response to an appeal, its purpose is to provide the missing ingredient, namely, representation. In effect, motor memory is how the past is acted, simulated, to which memory responds by imagining the past to supply the missing element. The process is exactly a synchronization by which memory molds itself undivided into the present of the body, the outcome of which is that a motor mechanism turns into an ideomotor present. This synchronization confirms that the whole purpose of the unity of mind and body is the making and preservation of the practical orientation of consciousness. The other term for attention to life is thus limitation, the act by which all that is not relevant to the active present is banned from consciousness.

Now if we ask the question of knowing the ultimate meaning of limitation, we meet again the central thesis of this book, namely, the notion of self-overcoming. We saw that perception limits the material world and, in so doing, changes necessity into the possible actions of the living being. With memory, we find the same process of the brain limiting the mind by plunging all that is not relevant to the present into unconsciousness. These two limitations combine to boost human action. Perception cuts an environment that is practically accessible, while memory supports action by mobilizing knowledge. The combination enhances the impact

of action on nature, but, more importantly, it changes the acting agent. By means of action, spirit restores to matter the perceptions it has borrowed but “in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom.”⁸⁹ This difference between what is borrowed and what is returned reveals self-creation, the use of limitation to overcome limitation, that is, the deployment of effort, the most precious of all gifts. Indeed, what else is effort but the way more is obtained from what is less? This game of resistance and victory is life exhorting humans to continue its creative work through self-effort. As such, limitation carries the ultimate message saying to whoever listens that the human being is life’s unfinished product. The next chapter will further elaborate on the unfinished status of the human.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, xiv (italics in text).
4. *Ibid.*, 193.
5. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 10.
6. Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 178.
7. Henri Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” in *Mind-Energy*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 157 (italics in text).
8. *Ibid.*, 178.
9. *Ibid.*, 160.
10. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 159.
11. *Ibid.*, 162 (italics in text).
12. Bergson, “The Soul and the Body,” in *Mind-Energy*, 70.
13. Bergson, “Dreams,” in *Mind-Energy*, 116.
14. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 188.
15. Frédéric Worms, *Introduction à matière et mémoire de Bergson* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 148 (my translation).
16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Imagination*, trans. Forrest Williams (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), 51.
17. Jean Hyppolite, “Various Aspects of Memory in Bergson,” trans. Athena V. Colman, Appendix II English Translation, in *The Challenge of Bergsonism*:

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 19. Worms, *Introduction à matière et mémoire de Bergson*, 148 (my translation).
 20. Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, 117–18 (italics in text).
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 22. Rudolf Bernet, "A Present Folded Back on the Past (Bergson)," *Research in Phenomenology* 35 (2005): 66.
 23. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 173.
 24. Worms, *Introduction à matière et mémoire de Bergson*, 144 (my translation).
 25. Bergson, "Memory of the Present and False Recognition," 165.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 152.
 28. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 332.
 29. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugu Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 59.
 30. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 163.
 31. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 59.
 32. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 81.
 33. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugu Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 79.
 34. Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey, "Introduction," in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 20.
 35. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 168.
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 37. Pierre Montebello, *Deleuze, philosophie et cinéma* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2008), 108 (my translation).
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 39. Ibid., 60.
 40. Alia Al-Saji, "The Memory of Another Past: Bergson, Deleuze and a New Theory of Time," *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004): 215.
 41. Ibid., 216.
 42. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 56.
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 44. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 78.
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47. Bergson, "Life and Consciousness," in *Mind-Energy*, 23.
48. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 56.
49. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 119.
50. Mael Renouard, "Virtuel et Réminiscence," in *Bergson*, ed. Camille Riquier (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2012), 290 (my translation).
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54. Ibid., 26.
55. Ibid., 22.
56. Jean-Michel Salanskis, "Bergson, le continu et l'être au monde," in *Annales bergsoniennes II: Bergson, Deleuze, la phénoménologie*, ed. Frédéric Worms (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 229 (my translation).
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58. Vetö, "Le passé selon Bergson," 16–17 (my translation).
59. Winkler, "Husserl and Bergson on Time and Consciousness," 105.
60. Ibid., 104.
61. Ibid., 105.
62. Al-Saji, "The Memory of Another Past," 204.
63. Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual*, 169.
64. Winkler, "Husserl and Bergson on Time and Consciousness," 106.
65. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (New York: Routledge, 2004), 125.
66. Hyppolite, "Various Aspects of Memory in Bergson," 120.
67. Ibid.
68. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 232.
69. Ibid., 197.
70. Ibid., 78.
71. Ibid., 167.
72. Bergson, "Memory of the Present and False Recognition," 161.
73. Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 53.
74. Ibid., 18.
75. Edward S. Casey, "Sartre on Imagination," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1981), 149.
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78. Ibid., 23.
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84. Ibid., 205–6 (italics in text).
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86. Ibid., 125.
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CHAPTER 7

Mysticism or the Overstepping of Nature

The themes of limitation and self-overcoming find their privileged field of application in the book dealing with moral and social issues, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Published twenty years after *Creative Evolution*, this last major work of Bergson not only came as a surprise, but also fed on and strengthened the controversies and misunderstandings surrounding his philosophy. Those scholars who had denounced the anti-rational tendency of his philosophy took the role accorded to mysticism in the book as an incontrovertible confirmation of irrationalism. Those who had doubted the philosophical viability of Bergsonian concepts saw the absence of a moral doctrine as a proof of the ineptitude of the whole system of thought. A major goal of this chapter is to show that *The Two Sources* continues and expands the major ideas of Bergsonism, and that the criticisms addressed to the book come from a misunderstanding of its intention. The objective of the book is not so much to propose a code of moral conduct and a theory of social change as to lay down the premises for the correct formulation of moral and sociopolitical problems. The premises spring from the central thinking of the book, to wit, the theme of the closed and open society. The theme leads to the correct formulation of moral and social problems, and shows how they can be overcome. In confronting the main issues of our time, such as the threat of war, the problems of justice, ecological issues, and the challenges of a civilization of consumption, the book highlights the grave imbalance between the conquest of material power and the spiritual

resources that humans have at their disposal. In addition to appealing to mundane forces, it calls for the overcoming of human limitations by a new spiritualism.

HALT VERSUS STAGE

One of the reasons for the controversies generated by *The Two Sources* is its “apparent mismatch” with “the philosophical and political stakes of its time.”¹ The focus on mysticism and the lack of substantial and relevant prescriptions for the numerous and serious social and moral problems besieging the post-First World War period gave the impression that the book is at best out of touch with reality and at worst relies on philosophical premises incapable of addressing human issues. All these criticisms would have been legitimate if the purpose of the book was the elaboration of a moral and social theory. However, as the very title of the book indicates, the objective is less about formulating a moral theory than unraveling the sources of morality and religion. Since the purpose is to uncover the true sources of moral conducts and religious beliefs, the book is best described as “a genealogy, the genealogy of morality and religion.”² This characterization is all the more appealing as it strengthens the already noted encounter between Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche on the issue of the overcoming of the human (see Chapter 3).

To begin with, the preoccupation of Bergson’s philosophy with moral and political issues is a late occurrence. Not that Bergson was indifferent to the social events of his time, as evidenced by his numerous diplomatic initiatives in favor of peace and his active engagement in the creation of the League of Nations, but because none of his major books prior to *The Two Sources* directly raises or confronts questions pertaining to moral and political matters. Take, for instance, his analysis of free will in his first book, *Time and Free Will*. The book strongly defends the reality of freedom, but does it in such a way that it excludes choice, thereby supporting an amoral, value-free theory of freedom (see Chapter 3). The same value-free approach is applied to the notion of *élan vital*: Bergson insists that the *élan* is not a teleological notion. Let us go further: Bergson openly takes credit for his avoidance of any moral perspective and concern. In a letter written in 1910 to one of his readers, he claims that he did “not give in, even unconsciously, to moral preoccupations in formulating [his] theoretical thoughts.”³ In another letter of the same year, he assures that he “philosophized outside any hidden religious thinking.”⁴

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4, Bergson's rejection of the philosophical value of negative ideas implies that evil is more a disappointment over expectations than a disturbance of the moral order of the world. To be sure, the reality of human sufferings is an undeniable fact, but it is so only for our practical life. To the extent that these pains express frustrations and setbacks, their reality should not be extended beyond the realm of subjectivity.

Does this moral neutrality of Bergson's mode of thinking signify that he places himself beyond good and evil, in the manner of Nietzsche? Without entering into a comprehensive and detailed comparison of the two systems of thought, we can say that for both Nietzsche and Bergson the ultimate criterion for evaluation is whether a moral code advances or counters the purpose of life. The result for both of them being that existing norms of life do not promote an ascending life, both call for a reevaluation of values. However, for Nietzsche the reevaluation must go in the direction of accepting life as it is without any religious embellishments and criminalization on the grounds that natural life does not meet our expectations. As Nietzsche sees it, the net outcome of these reactions is the devaluation and reprobation of real life in favor of an imaginary eternal life or an outright nihilism. Instead of reacting, Nietzsche recommends that we embrace real life. And what real life wants is power and the constant increase of that power. This will to power decrees what increases power as good, and as evil what denies life by diminishing or surrendering power. Clearly, for this reevaluation of values in the direction of the will to power, not "'mankind' but overman is the goal!"⁵ Free of all resentment against life, which is the secret of the religious and moral condemnation of life and hence typical of humankind, this overman is defined by the "most joyful, most excessively-exuberant yes to life."⁶

For Bergson, the proposal to welcome life as it is offers a misplaced bargain in view of the fact that for him the life that we incarnate is an unfinished, arrested movement. No doubt, as is the case with Nietzsche, the injunction is to overcome the present state of the human, but for Bergson this overcoming is a forward movement, not a return to an alleged authentic essence of life by casting out all religious, metaphysical, and moral adornments. The purpose of the latter is not so much to mask or deform real life as to express its unfinished nature. It follows that overcoming is to open up what has closed as a result of a stoppage caused by the resistance of materiality so as to let the original *élan*

continue its ascending movement. For Bergson, a distinction should be made between the movement and its stoppage: the former is the authentic one, while the stoppage is just a *modus vivendi* between the movement and the encountered resistance. Accordingly, the injunction to overcome the human means the continuation of an unfinished creative task, whose direction is indicated by the values that Nietzsche criticizes as being anti-life. Indeed, the values must be viewed as so many yearnings and anticipations caused by the interruption of the original movement. Viewed as an arrest, natural life is not something that we return to; rather, it is something that we push forward to untie the knots restraining life. As a compromise between the vital movement and the encountered obstacle, nature is not the goal, but what must be overcome to resume the movement. Therefore, though both Bergson and Nietzsche speak of overcoming, for Bergson the condition that must be overcome is nature, while for Nietzsche nature is what we must recover, assume, and celebrate.

The Bergsonian overcoming of nature is inscribed in the theory that morality and religion have not one but two sources. For those critics who note that “in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson is not doing moral theory,” either to criticize him or to underscore his original attempt “to determine the origin, or better, the origins of morality and religion,” the focus should be on the duality of origin.⁷ Bergson’s dealing with the problem of morality and with the moral and sociopolitical issues of his time from a genealogical perspective is indicative not only of his intention but also of the manner in which he wants to pose the problems. Following his usual method, he first wants to remove the false problems and then reformulate, better still, invent the real ones by discarding the use of inappropriate categories. Concerning moral, religious, and social ideas, the most common approach is the depiction of their undeniable evolution through a stage-producing-stage conception. Whether as a result of the progress of enlightenment, the encounter of different cultures, or any other reason, the assumption has been that moral, religious, and social ideas have evolved progressively from an initial stage of savagery to higher and improved stages of civilization during the course of human history. Since this gradual evolution assumes that the higher stage continues the lower stage, changes are viewed as the growth of the same ideas by means of additions along a continuum. For Bergson, this conception harbors a common illusion about the evolution of social and moral life: “because an evolutionary process has been

observed starting from a certain point, it is believed that this point must have been reached by the same evolutionary process.”⁸ In so thinking, scholars ignore the qualitative changes, the “discontinuous leaps,” testifying to the creative nature of evolution.⁹ Here Bergson does no more than apply to human history what he has been criticizing all along, namely, “the confusion of a movement with the series of positions it traverses, of a process of becoming with what has already become, of duration with space.”¹⁰

Regarding social life in particular, dialectical thinking, in its Hegelian or Marxist version, has been at the forefront of a linear conception of historical progression. Its advantage over other forms of linear conceptions is clear enough: rather than the appeal to externally induced changes, the notion of internal contradiction and the ensuing struggle between polarized components enable the thinking of self-motion and hence the analysis of the historical process as self-development. Although the shortcomings of dialectics already have been discussed, especially in Chapter 4, the case of social evolution offers the best opportunity to consolidate the contrast between dialectical thinking and Bergsonism. All the more reason for revisiting the contrast is that Bergson seems to desert his stance against negativity and negative ideas by describing social evolution in terms of the struggle between the closed and the open.

Admittedly, it is very tempting to interpret in terms of opposition the relationship between the closed and the open. For instance, after warning against the linear conception of “the passage from closed to open as a simple expansion,” Frédéric Worms continues to describe their relationship in opposing terms.¹¹ Thus, referring to mysticism, he writes: “what Bergson calls ‘natural’ religion ... doesn’t disappear anymore than the ‘morality’ of the same name, even if it encounters its radically opposed other. It will continue to offer resistance.”¹² Likewise, John Mullarkey maintains that the open and the closed signify that “society is pulled in two opposed directions.”¹³ Any suggestion that society is composed of two polarized and struggling forces injects negativity into the Bergsonian thinking, thereby justifying the charge of inconsistency. By contrast, the term “resistance” is frequently used by Bergson to signify impediment as a result of stoppage. The clue here is that stoppage does not exactly square with opposition. An obstacle resists, not because it actively opposes with the aim of dragging the whole process in the opposite direction—which is how dialectics sees contradiction—but because of its inertia, fixity. While the negative in dialectics is an active,

moving force, in the case of Bergson, the resistance due to inertia is not competing for supremacy. Consequently, even where Bergson speaks of “a gradual disappearance of the opposition between the static and the dynamic,” the understanding must be that the opposition in question is about inertia, less so about the active and forward-moving antagonism of dialectics.¹⁴ But there is more: resistance can acquire a positive meaning by assuming the role of a stimulant. It then contributes to the gestation of effort to move forward through creative means what has come to a halt. As Worms acknowledges, “openness ... demands effort and action,” which, in the context of the oneness of the original *élan*, can only be understood as self-overcoming.¹⁵

Before analyzing this point further, we must multiply the perspectives countering the tempting reading of Bergsonism through the lens of dialectics. Let me use the medium of an image. Imagine a person pushing a cart full of groceries hits a parking bumper that immobilizes the cart despite repeated efforts to move it forward. The repeated failures to solve the problem advises creativity, for instance, changing the direction of the effort and lifting the front of the cart. In addition to showing that the bumper is not a negativity, the example ascertains that the way out is not to engage in a struggle. What the situation requires is not clashing, which is to no avail, but a problem-solving attitude. And the problem is solved, not by opposition, but by getting around the difficulty. Just as the bumper is what it is in that it opposes nothing, similarly the fact that the cart bumps against it is all that a pushing movement can give. This is to say that the situation is different from the case of two opposite forces struggling and pulling in opposite directions and reaching a temporary synthesis only to split again, thereby drawing a linear process of self-development by means of contradiction and overcoming of contradiction. Instead, the continuation of the movement of the cart requires a divergence, a change of direction. Since the movement diverges to circumvent the problem, the process is not the stage-by-stage perfecting of the same movement. In other words, given that existing societies do not represent stages in a linear process but are stoppages of a creative effort, by themselves they cannot go forward because the vital *élan* being finite quickly reaches its limit (see Chapter 4). Here one should savor the consistency of Bergson's thinking. Arrest means that society is not driven by a preexisting goal, as is the case in a teleological conception of history. Neither is an arrested society causally pushed by internal contradiction, as dialectical thinking tells us since, having reached its limits, it cannot

propel itself. The only way it can move forward is through the possibility of a fissure or deviancy. Bergson calls this crack in the system of nature “the call of the hero,” the best representation of which is the mystic.¹⁶ The mystic is this deviant personality that has the power to awaken the dormant force of emotion, the very one that lifts people above their nature. Needless to say, the fissure can be explained by the buildup of tension within the arrested society. Nonetheless, the explanation is partial because the leap by which the accumulation of tension turns into a qualitative change occurs only when there is an inspiration transcending the society that is simply going round in circles.

We already know that divergence is typical of the way life operates: the oneness of its movement continues through divergent paths, thereby generating different forms of life that are all perfect in the sense of being all that they can be. As stoppages, they represent the maximum of what can be achieved in the same direction, and so do not contain any emptiness or lack. They are not moments in a linear process or the lower stages of a higher moment. In a word, they are differentiations, not successive gradations. The same movement bumping against the obstacle of materiality stops and bifurcates and, in so doing, becomes increasing lighter by offloading some of its cumbersome contents on the divergent lines. Giving the gist of what separates him from the linear conception of development, Bergson writes:

*The cardinal error which, from Aristotle onwards, has vitiated most of the philosophies of nature, is to see in vegetative, instinctive and rational life, three successive degrees of the development of one and the same tendency, whereas they are three divergent directions of an activity that has split up as it grew. The difference between them is not a difference of intensity, nor, more generally, of degree, but of kind.*¹⁷

All that is needed to change this qualitative differentiation of life into the vision of a single movement going from the undeveloped to the developed by means of addition on a linear continuum is a retrospective reconstruction of the process from the developed stage to the lower ones. The reconstruction places the bifurcations in the same temporal bloc and reads them as inferior, deficient moments of the advanced stage.

A pertinent illustration of this form of thinking is Hegel’s understanding of world history as the gradual realization of the idea of freedom. At first undeveloped, the idea of freedom “assumes successive forms

which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape.”¹⁸ This gradual realization of freedom entails the ranking of the various cultures of the world in terms of the highest to the lowest stages. Hence the main divisions of world history: “the Eastern nations knew only that one is free; the Greek and Roman world only that some are free; while we know that all men absolutely (man as man) are free.”¹⁹ The West is thus ranked as the highest stage and the driving force of history, with the consequence that non-Western cultures are viewed as its deficient moments. The Bergsonian scheme authorizes a different reading, which is that the various cultures are differentiations of the same impulse rather than being moments of a linear development. As variations of the same impulse, none of these cultures is to be taken as a model or a goal for others. Let alone the West being a goal to other cultures, the creative nature of the process cannot even be described in terms of pursuit of a goal, obvious as it is that the very idea of an embedded goal erases the possibility of true creation.

An objection comes to mind. It has to do with Bergson’s characterization of “humanity” “as the ground of evolution.”²⁰ To the extent that the characterization seems to assign not only a final goal to evolution but also announces that the goal has been achieved, it suggests that Bergson did not truly succeed in liberating himself from a linear and goal-oriented conception of evolution. It would have been so if Bergson did not qualify his characterization by adding that humanity is the term of evolution “in a quite different sense” than the realization of a preplanned goal.²¹ Besides his repeated efforts to clear his conception of evolution of all teleological connotations by emphasizing its creative nature and its development “in the form of a sheaf,” Bergson attributes a special place to humanity because it represents a happy breakthrough.²² While all other forms of life have ended in oscillation, “at one single point the obstacle has been forced, the impulsion has passed freely. It is this freedom that the human form registers.”²³ Humanity is the end of evolution, not because it is the final moment of the materialization of a preplanned goal, but because it represents the opening of a line that can continue the creative work of the *élan*. Stated otherwise, the human is not a point of arrival, but of a new point of departure of the *élan*. Going beyond the unconscious effort to inverse the trend of materiality, this new departure elevates the endeavor to the level of the conscious effort of the human to transcend its natural limitations.

The question of the attribution or rejection of a goal to evolution simply confirms the categorical difference between the notion of stage and that of stoppage. While stage implies a movement in pursuit of a given goal, stoppage incorporates opportunities for the arrested movement to overflow the blockage and spill over into different paths. The consequence of thinking in terms of stoppage is that an evolutionary process becomes conceivable even though it is not planned in advance. By contrast, the notion of stage is directional and, as such, posits an implicit goal that the movement is gradually actualizing. Because the very notion of stage implies a termination, for Hegel the stage of the realization of freedom, that is, the modern era, represents the final phase of world history. This forced Marx to talk about the existence of another stage, namely, communism, which would effectively end the history of the struggle of classes. The Bergsonian vision has a different take: any social formation as merely a stoppage calls for a renewed effort to get around it. This creative effort to overcome an obstacle initiates an unpredictable process and yields products that are always surpassable.

The depiction of social evolution in terms of stoppages and renewed efforts to circumvent the obstacles focuses on the human condition in that it views the human, not as a goal, but as a halt that must be overcome. Consequently, the criterion to assess social and ethical theories must be their propensity to continue the creative movement, beyond reforming or improving the human condition. Those critics of Bergson who complain of the lack of a concrete social and moral theory dealing with the actual problems of the modern world, together with those who deplore the appeal to mysticism and psychical research, miss that the main intention of the *Two Sources* is to frame social and moral problems in terms of resistance and the creative effort to overcome it. Let us try to clarify the essence of this overcome.

DUALITY OF SOURCE AND SELF-OVERCOMING

In unravelling two sources of morality and religion and assigning to them directions such that the one wants to inject movement into the static tendency of the other, not only does Bergson familiarize us with the notion that whatever is achieved at a given time is an arrest and not a stage, but he also invites us to think of the duality of source as a functional notion. Indeed, the articulation of the two sources portrays a structure of self-overcoming through the act of transcending resistance

and hence of obtaining by means of self-effort more than what is originally given. This formulation is consistent with a philosophy of duration, which always overflows the static and the immobile. In its application to the human condition, the primacy of mobility defines philosophy, not as the study of human nature, but as “an effort to go beyond the human state.”²⁴ For such an effort, social and ethical problems cannot be adequately posed if they are viewed as the realization of an implicit goal through the addition of successive gains. Rather, the so-called gains turn into new challenges requiring renewed efforts, not to arrive somewhere, but to continue the creative *élan*, whose defining feature is that it resents that there should be anything like an endgame for life.

The notion of two sources and their respective tendency give the structure of self-overcoming by first posing social and moral problems in dualistic terms and then by transcending dualism. The one source is a force of pressure whose function is the conservation of social cohesion; the other is a force of attraction impelling humanity to renovate and overcome itself. The first one actualizes the rooting of human life into nature, while the second direction is an invitation to overcome the pressure of nature and resume the creative movement of life. However, as is often the case with Bergson, intuition transcends analysis and distinction must be followed by the next move, which is “to restore a fundamental unity.”²⁵ In effect, pressure and attraction do not constitute distinct forces that are external to each other; they are just complementary functions of the same *élan*. In the words of Bergson, “it is the same force manifesting itself directly, as it rotates on its own axis, in the human species once constituted, and subsequently acting indirectly, through the medium of privileged persons, in order to drive humanity forward.”²⁶ To say that it is the same force that acts both as pressure and attraction, as pushing and pulling, is not only to grasp the unity as an effort to overcome but also to specify the effort as self-overcoming. Conceived through the paradigm of self-overcoming, dualism posits monism, which is how life transcends itself by overcoming its own resistance, namely, materiality, the inverse movement of life. The oneness of what closes and opens means life overcoming its own limitations, a process that Bergson defines as a “creation of self by self,” and which “seems to be the very object of human life.”²⁷

The crucial importance of the notion of self-overcoming derives from the fact that it allows the thinking of duality as unity. Without it, the two sources and their respective tendency remain juxtaposed, making

the connection between the two tendencies harder to visualize. Take, for instance, the approach of Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White. In a rich book that they edited, they ask the right questions: "Why life has two tendencies? What does it mean to say that one tendency is 'closed' and the other 'open'?"²⁸ Their answer is that "life tends toward self-preservation, reproduction and stability, *and* toward continuous and unpredictable change."²⁹ The answer correctly describes the two tendencies of life, but the use of the emphasized conjunction "and" falls short of internally linking the two tendencies. Self-preservation, reproduction, and stability do not define life; they are characteristics resulting from the resistance of matter, which is itself the inversed movement of life. In other words, the effort of life is none other than the attempt to inverse its own inversion. Through its own primary inversion as materiality, life stops and uses its own stoppage as a stimulant to overcome itself, and so to self-create. Thus, to the extent that the tendency to close generates social groups by means of exclusion, thereby immobilizing an *élan* that wants to spread to all humankind and living beings, it serves as a stimulant to overcome the closing through the generation of the powerful forces of love and care. An *élan* that is stopped is an *élan* driven by the need to overrun the obstacle.

Viewed from the vantage point of prevailing over resistance, the open morality and even more so the love of the mystic represent the highest levels of self-overcoming. Morality understood, not as obedience, but as opening, forward movement is a victory over one's limitations and nature. Indeed, what could be more expressive of self-overcoming than achieving selflessness and cosmopolitanism by transcending our natural egoism and our herd mentality? Of all forms of human achievement—artistic, scientific, and technological inventions, sociopolitical changes, etc.—moral opening is superior because it "shatters the specific frames straightjacketing humanity" and does so by fostering "collective dynamics."³⁰ While other forms of achievement either increase our power or embellish our life, the open morality is engaged in the business of renovating our nature.

That Bergson calls for the smashing of all barriers and exclusions through the triumph of love sounds discordant with his philosophy of life. The question of knowing how Bergson transitions from a philosophy of life to the realm of values, better still, to the realm of selfless and cosmopolitan love is certainly legitimate in view of the apparent inconsistency of drawing from life values that seem to go against it. If our natural

life is defined by exclusion and the selfish and animal instinct of survival, how could values advocating a contrary direction emanate from the same life? Is it not a philosophical commonplace to argue that oughtness cannot be deduced from what is stated as a factual reality? This impossibility is demonstrated by Nietzsche's consistent stand of placing his philosophy beyond good and evil. However, we saw that for Bergson this beyond signifies the overcoming of the natural, not its valorization to the detriment of the spiritual. This is evidenced by the fact that Bergson's "tribute to life does not lead to the praise of the will to power," but to the opposite, that is, to the forsaking of power through the celebration of mystic love of all humanity.³¹ How does Bergson join Christ with what many critics call a vitalist philosophy?

Before rushing to speak of contradiction or revision, one would be well advised to pay attention to the two sources of morality and religion and, most importantly, to the characterization of the one source as arrest and of the other as a forward movement. The provision of two sources differently oriented enables Bergson to conceive at once life as nature and as the effort to transcend nature. In defining life by the dual tendency to close and to open, Bergson secures the means to go from the factual to the normative. If the fundamental nature of life is to overcome itself by going beyond its limitations, then it harbors normativity by the very fact that its achievements are stoppages of an *élan* that is by essence mobility. Value lies in movement, as opposed to the factual, which is nothing but an interruption of movement. And what continues movement cannot be anything other than love, since its condition is the liberation from natural determinations and the achievement of selflessness. The highest moment of self-overcoming is just this selflessness, this liberation from egocentrism so as to continue the creative work of life. Speaking of the plan that the mystic has for humanity, Bergson says, it is "to make of it a new species, or rather deliver it from the necessity of being a species; for every species means a collective halt."³²

This appeal to mysticism must be seen from the standpoint of the considerable pressure of natural determinations. Bergson has a hard time understanding how philosophers came to believe that reason could be the source of morality. Seeing the force exerted by interest, passion, and herd mentality, one must be naïve to believe that reason possesses the power to counter them. To assign this role to reason is like believing that "the fly-wheel drives the machinery."³³ No doubt, reason regulates our life in many ways, but it does not follow that it has the power to prevail over the thrusts

of egoism unless it is supported by forces that seduce rather than command natural drives. Moreover, the function of reason being to serve life in its numerous dealings with reality, it is reasonable to assume that it “would more likely counsel egoism.”³⁴ When reason takes a different course and aims at silencing egoism, the explanation must be that it is imbued with the force that wants to overrun natural determinations. The powerlessness of reason suggests that the pressure emanating from egoism can only be countered by the force of emotion imparted by the forward push of life. To quote Ernest Cassirer, with Bergson, “there is a rise above the sphere of the purely vital; but this rise is not given to us in the idea, in the categorical command of duty, but in the sentiment of love.”³⁵ The push would lose much of its vigor if it turned into intellectual representations exhibiting the pros and cons of acting morally. It retains its force if it speaks the language of sentiment: in this way we are not so much convinced as seduced. This is surely how an *élan* would act to carry us over the fences of nature, unlike a pure command telling us to do the right thing but without furnishing at the same time the impulse to effectively do it. Since self-overcoming is about opening what is closed, command and obedience do not provide what the task requires. What is needed, instead, is the force of emotion because the task is less about obeying a law than rising above all the constraints and exclusions imprinted in our nature. This rise is none other than the attraction exercised by mystic love and exactly corresponds to the opening of self-love to universal, non-exclusive love. This pure love is how the creative *élan* manifests itself whenever it finds the opportunity to coalesce with human consciousness, thereby becoming the conscious love of the mystic for all humanity and living beings.

Does this mean Bergson’s argument that reason is more regulatory than motivational puts him in the company of empiricist thinkers, such as David Hume, who writes “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and ... it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will?”³⁶ Paradoxical as it may sound, Bergson moves away from empiricist thinkers because of their inability to account for obligation. As Carl Power notes,

an empiricist generally begins with a disposition that is supposed to belong to human nature (e.g., self-interest, pride, sympathy, benevolence) and then attempts to show that not only is its aim in conformity with reason, but its accomplishment is best pursued in a rational manner.³⁷

This alleged agreement between sentiment and reason overlooks the imperative character of morality, that is, the pressure of the natural or closed morality. Worse yet, in recommending the best or the smartest way to satisfy natural feelings, reason becomes their accomplice, and the whole issue of overpowering the natural egoism of the living individual or the force of obligation remains unexplained. If both feelings and reason side with nature, then it is not clear why morality assumes the character of commandment.

The point of assigning two sources to morality is to make a distinction in kind between a morality of obligation and a morality inspired by love. As rightly observed by empiricist thinkers, in default of being able to prevail over natural sentiments, the best that reason can do is to advise wisdom as the most reliable and secure path to their satisfaction. Nevertheless, though empiricism is right in reducing the role of reason to counseling, it goes astray when it appeals to affective dispositions to account for actions carrying the sense of obligation. While affectivity is a drive, an impulse to go after something, obligation is a constraint, a prohibition of a desired thing; in a word, it speaks the language of "forbidden fruit." Empiricism overlooks that the expression of morality in the form of obligation is unavoidable. Even if altruistic feelings exist, they coexist with egoistic sentiments that are much more powerful. So long as the focus is on the individual, we deal with desires and aspirations that neither reason nor altruistic feelings can control. The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that we must look for the source of moral obligation beyond the sentiments and rationality of the individual; we must go to the source of the formation of human individuality. In other words, we must find the source of obligation in nature, in the biological constitution of the individual.

MORAL OBLIGATION AND SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

The above discussion establishes that the correct way of formulating moral and social problems is via the distinction between the tendency to social cohesion and conservatism and the tendency to move forward through innovation. One important notion to keep in mind is that this distinction effectively conflates moral obligation with social cohesion and conservatism. The individual morality that philosophers study and advocate is often a mixed notion in that it sprinkles the morality of group cohesion with some mystic inspiration. For Bergson, the very notion

of moral obligation has to do more with social cohesion than with the respect of human dignity and rights. In short, moral obligation is nature's way of implementing and protecting the allegiance of individuals to social groups. In Bergson's eyes, it is not clear why morality would take the form of obligation if its objective were human fraternity. As stated already, universal love cannot be a commandment; it can only be an affective disposition, the very one that St. Augustine admirably captured when he said: "Love, and do what you will."

To say that obligation stems neither from rationality nor from what drives individuals as individuals, still less from what opens the individual to the universal, leaves only one choice: it can only signify the incorporation of individuals into closed social groups. Simply put, obligation refers to the natural sociability of human beings; it is what "binds us together into a (closed) society."³⁸ The emphasis must be on closed society, given that exclusion is the act by which a social group is formed. It stands to reason that the characterization of the human as a social animal presupposes a natural morality binding individuals into exclusive groups. And if we discard the origination of this morality from rationality or feelings deriving from individuals, what else remains to account for moral obligation but the biological fabric of the individual? Only by rooting morality in the biological can we explain obligation or the obedience of individuals to social norms. This means that individuals are not first moral and then join a collective existence: moral obligation is how they are social beings.

Bergson shows the importance of this biological basis by contrasting his social theory with that of Emile Durkheim, who influenced his thinking. Though, like Durkheim, Bergson "sees behind moral obligation a social exigency," he stops short of attributing obligation to a collective mentality that is not only distinct but also opposed to the individual mentality.³⁹ For Durkheim, the essential condition for sociology to become an autonomous science is to define clearly the object it wants to study. In particular, the definition must clearly separate the sociological from psychological and biological facts. The power of coercion on the individual inherent in the sociological fact sufficiently demarcates it from a psychological fact and the absence of an organizational structure determined by hereditary characteristics indicates that society "is irreducible to the organism."⁴⁰ It is to account for both the coercive and non-biological nature of the social that Durkheim poses the existence of a collective consciousness. Since social facts are collective representations with a coercive

power over individuals, Durkheim argues that they “cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness.”⁴¹

According to Bergson, Durkheim correctly described the features of obligation but missed its origin. His supposition of a collective mentality that transcends and opposes the individual goes against the foundational principle of sociology, namely, the natural sociability of the human individual. If the individual is social by nature, Bergson argues that “we fail to see why these two mentalities should clash.”⁴² Likewise, the supposition of a clash rejects the view of society as a continuation of the organizational work of life, despite the obvious similitude between social and biological organizations. As is the case with the composition of living organisms by interdependent organs, the social combines individuation with association. “Association,” Bergson writes, “is the most general form of living activity, since life is organization, and that, this being so, we pass by imperceptible transitions from the relation between cells in an organism to the relation between individuals in society.”⁴³ To pass through matter, the vital *élan* individualizes but only to continue the organizational work by associating the individualized parts. The grouping of individualized parts generates a greater force enabling an upgraded pursuit of the creative work of life. In other words, the *élan* divides to circumvent the obstacle of materiality and associates the individualized creatures into small units by virtue of its unity. At this early stage, viability depends on smallness, even if it means leaving some faint opening for future expansions.

It is when we place obligation in the general method and purpose of the organizational work of life that its presence and characteristics become fully intelligible. As a rule, nature organizes living beings into groups by the medium of instinct, as shown by animal societies, as with the instinct of insects, for instance the Hymenopterae with their complex social systems. While instinctive organization achieves a high level of perfection in terms of implementation, its obvious drawback is its invariability, whose consequence is that it hampers the use of intelligence. The dilemma of nature is thus clear enough: intelligence requires that individuals be capable of initiative and of various unpredictable actions; but these same requirements conflict with the demands of social cohesion. As one author puts it, “in order to guarantee social cohesion and at the same time to allow for the free activity of intelligence, nature had to design a framework which would provide for necessity and contingency of action.”⁴⁴

Before focusing on the nature of the framework, it is necessary to show why Bergson argues that the exercise of intelligence would be antithetical to social cohesion. After all, who else but an intelligent being would be able to see the benefits of social life? Thomas Hobbes, for instance, derives society from the ability of intelligent beings to understand the necessity of “a common power” to provide a secure environment so that “by their own industry and by the fruits of the earth they many nourish themselves and live contentedly.”⁴⁵ The incompatibility between Bergson’s view of society as a continuation of biological organization and the theory of the contractual origin of society put aside, it is arguable to maintain that a biological pressure is all the more necessary in view of the fact that the benefits of social life became obvious only later on, once society had registered some advancement. Prior to seeing any advancement, autonomous and intelligent beings would probably draw the conclusion that they are better off on their own. More importantly, without the prior constraint of a collective life, none of the promises of intelligence would bear any fruit. For intelligence to be operational and contribute to social advancement, the preservation of a social order that frees individuals from the constant worry about their survival and safety is a prior condition. Far from being an outcome of intelligence, social order is a condition for the effective use of intelligence. Hobbes himself concurs with this assessment: without security, he says, “there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth.”⁴⁶ All those philosophers from Plato to Karl Marx who have defined society by the need to cooperate in the production of material life admit that human individuals are unable to survive by themselves despite their intelligence. No less than the obvious advantages of dividing labor for the purpose of efficiency and specialization, there is the need for a social order based on the distinction between command and obedience. A mere association of free individuals would not be good at defending the social order internally as well as against external threats. To the extent that a social order necessitates coordination and subordination, it cannot be just manufactured: it presupposes a distinction between those who command and those who obey. Once it is admitted that obedience cannot be artificially introduced, the inevitable conclusion is that it must have some natural foundation. Consequently, an inherent power of coercion of society constitutes the *sine qua non* of any social order whose origin is better explained when viewed as a continuation of biological organization

rather than as a collective entity transcending the individual consciousness, in the manner of Durkheim. For Bergson, social life is immanent to intelligent life for the essential reason that intelligence continues the fundamental tendency of life, which is to act on matter (see Chapter 4). Accordingly, both the requirement of a relatively secure environment and the significant upgrading of the practical capacity of intelligence through organization and cooperation attest to the generational link binding society and intelligence to life.

It is because philosophers do not pay enough attention to the conflict between social obedience and intelligent life that they look for the origin of obligation in utilitarian reasoning or in altruistic feelings. If we drop the idea of society as a natural constraint, there is no doubt that humans will behave as contract theoreticians describe them. They will be protective of their freedom and rights, but also cognizant of the usefulness of living in stable and organized groups and willing to sacrifice some of their natural rights to bring about a public force. Nonetheless, the problem is that one cannot draw from an agreement to live in a community because of its usefulness something that looks like a categorical obligation. By its very nature, the farthest reason can go in this direction is a conditional commitment, which is nowhere near to instituting a firm and stable social order. Such an order requires a political organization based on the unconditional obedience of the many to whoever assumes leadership, a condition that cannot be obtained by artificial means. It can only emanate from a natural constraint, from “a command that admits neither reason nor reply,” an obligation that says: “You must because you must.”⁴⁷ The categorical nature of social obligation explains why Bergson speaks of “closed morality,” even though the notion does not cover what is usually termed as a moral conduct. In this case, morality signifies the good functioning of society, less so a rightful ethical behavior. The fact that the obligation creates groups by excluding other groups and inducing hostility between them can hardly be characterized as a moral act in the ordinary sense of the word. The reason why Bergson retains the term “closed morality” is not to state the ethical value of its content; it is to point out the form that biological determinism takes when it has to deal with intelligence. Instead of acting as instinct, it takes the form of obligation to compel without blocking the exercise of intelligence. An intelligence that feels obligated experiences constraint while retaining the sense of freedom.

To say that society is a continuation of the organizing work of life certainly contains the danger of forgetting that a human society, unlike

organisms, is composed of intelligent and distinct individuals. Still, acknowledging the difference does not mean that the human society is not natural. Needed, therefore, is a concept that reconciles the part of nature with the features of intelligence or, which is the same thing, stability with some latitude to flexibility, conservation with innovation. This concept is obligation and its mode of operation is the act of generating closed societies by exclusion. The latter induces a mental makeup of absolute commitment of individuals to specific groups as the condition of their existence owing to the hostile nature of everything that is outside their respective groups. Individuals belong to a group means that the group defines the conditions of their membership and ensures their protection. To exclude, the group must have specific features that distinguishes it from other groups. In this way, membership to the group is dependent on individuals acquiring those features, thereby assuming a group identity.

In explaining the mode of operation of obligation, we must make sure that there is a distinction between the pressure per se and what is being pressed on individuals, between the form of obligation and its content. Any failure to make a clear distinction will convert obligation into instinct, whose consequence would be that the link uniting individuals would be like the one binding the ant to the ant-hill. To avoid turning obligation into an instinctive behavior, we must distinguish obligation in general from particular obligations. The latter are acquired; the former is natural and thus establishes, not a particular rule, but the necessity of having rules. As Bergson puts it, “no one obligation being instinctive, obligation as a whole *would have been* instinct if human societies were not, so to speak, ballasted with variability and intelligence. It is a virtual instinct, like that which lies behind the habit of speech”⁴⁸ Just as what is innate is the ability to speak, and not any particular language, which is acquired, so obligation in general establishes the necessity of having rules and leaves to invention the particular rules by which it is materialized.

Once the distinction between the form and the content of obligation is established, there remains the question of knowing the disposition that allows the marriage of necessity with some measure of flexibility. A disposition that acts as a constraint while being acquired is what everybody calls habit and, precisely for Bergson, “habit is to human societies what instinct is to the organism.”⁴⁹ What else does the commonly held view of habit as a second nature suggest but the fact of learned and acquired behaviors becoming so deeply fixated that they look innate? In the same

vein, Hume has familiarized us with the idea that the force of habit can be such as to fill in for the missing necessary connection between matters of fact so that “all inferences from experience ... are effects of custom, not of reasoning.”⁵⁰ For Bergson, then, the pressure exerted by society on individuals is of the same nature as a compulsive habit. The notion of habit enables him to conceive of society as a constraint while warding off the strictly deterministic implication that his view of society as a continuation of biological organization would otherwise have. As Paola Marrati notes, “Bergson by no means affirms that social and political forms of organization are biologically determined or determinable. Every habit is radically contingent. The only thing that is not contingent is the *habit of taking up habits*.”⁵¹ Not only are specific habits contingent or learned, but also none of them acquires the inflexible character that is typical of natural determinism. Habit compels but never goes to the extent of erasing completely the possibility of resistance. While such and such habit can be avoided or resisted, it is impossible not to contract habits. In effect, an individual unable to acquire habits would not be socializable. Individuals become members of a given society through a constant process of culturalization starting in early childhood and by which they acquire the values and behavioral norms of the society. In short, socialization boils down to the internalization of contracted habits resulting from tutelage and dressage.

The above clarifications do not yet fully tell us how we pass from obligation in general to the contraction of habits. To see the connection between obligation and habit, we must view obligation as a pure pressure of association engrained deeply in the individual's psyche. The pressure is felt, but only as an urge that it is devoid of content. Bergson characterizes it as “an inkling of some enormous, or rather some shadowy, thing that exerted pressure on us.”⁵² In actualizing itself as a disposition to contract habits, the obligation associates individuals on the basis of what is acquired, shared, instructed, and valued. The acquired habits bind individuals together by homogenizing their pursuits and reactions. This is not because as with instinct they prevent dissenting reactions, but because as with any acquired habit, they make the transgression of what has become habitual difficult. The reason for the difficulty is the formation of automatism that induces the sense of normality so that any resistance or transgression feels as if it goes against the normal order of things, as doing what should not be done. Obligation could find no better support than the normativity of the acquired by the force of habit:

this force is how an external order to the individual implants an internal resistance to contravention within the individual. Durkheim could not go beyond the opposition between the individual consciousness and the collective mentality because he failed to see that habit restores the continuity between the biological and the social via the internalization of what is learned and acquired, in contrast to mere imposition. Incidentally, neither the intervention of habit nor its impact should come as a surprise here: as noted by Leonard Lawlor, “all obligations for Bergson are habits; the whole of obligation is the habit of contracting habits, the ‘habit-memory’ of *Matter and Memory*.”⁵³ As elaborated in the previous chapter, habit-memory is made of acquired automatisms that are felt as a spur to the point of making conscious decisions unnecessary. Psychologically, habit-memory is instrumental in the selection of useful memories from the past; socially, it induces conformity of reactions of individuals around acquired and shared values and behaviors.

THE NATURAL SOCIETY

Moral obligation understood as an “exigency of sociability” rather than a manifestation of “practical reason” frames a closed society by means of exclusion and internal hierarchical order.⁵⁴ According to Bergson, the closed society is defined by such features as “self-centeredness, cohesion, hierarchy, absolute authority of the chief ... discipline, the war-spirit.”⁵⁵ Obviously, social cohesion presupposes the sense of solidarity arising from a shared identity, where identity is established by exclusion of other groups, if not by outright aversion toward them. No less obvious is the fact that obligation takes a concrete form through an internal hierarchical order based on the distinction between those who command and those who obey. A word of caution: because obligation has a biological foundation, one must not jump to the conclusion that the distinction between ruling elites and the common people is naturally ordained. As already stated, what comes from nature is obligation in general; particular obligations are products of human inventions. To uphold that no superior innate physical or psychical attribute separates rulers from the ruled majority, Bergson speaks of “dimorphism,” that is, of the presence of a natural disposition that “makes of each of us both a leader with the instinct to command and a subject ready to obey.”⁵⁶ In implanting in each person both the tendency to command and the tendency to obey, nature allowed circumstances, individual factors, and upbringing

to decide who effectively becomes leader and who becomes follower. Moreover, one of the effects of a long-established ruling class is exhibiting behaviors and instilling representations conveying the sense of its “natural” superiority. The outcome of this indoctrination is the repression of the tendency to command in most individuals.

In addition to stemming from an act of exclusion, the closed society needs to be structured around the absolute authority of the chief. The authority is inscribed in the imperative nature of the obligation, in its demand for an unconditional obedience. In effect, absolute authority is the only alternative given that anything like a conditional obedience would entail a fragile social order that would disintegrate at the slightest challenge. All the more reason for authority to be absolute is that the natural society is organized for the purpose of war. According to Bergson, “the origin of war is ownership, individual or collective, and since humanity is predestined to ownership by its structure, war is natural.”⁵⁷ The characteristic of intelligence is the use and invention of inorganic tools to shape nature in accordance to its needs. Since tools and the products of labor can be appropriated, it is natural for individuals to prevent their being taken away by claiming ownership rights over them. This natural claim to property posits war as the very means by which it is both defended and threatened, compelling human groups to adopt a social organization that is ready for war, to the great delight of the authority of the chief. As an enticement to war, property does no more than consolidate the cohesion of the group by emerging as the condition for the survival of individuals. Nothing could do more to cement the cohesion of the social group and its hierarchical organization than this need to wage or counter war. This natural character of war brings to mind Hobbes’s description of the state of nature as a state of war. The big difference, though, is that, whereas Hobbes speaks of a “war of every man against every man,” Bergson believes that the war is not between individuals, but between social groups.⁵⁸ What is more, far from being the reason why individuals decide to form social groups, as Hobbes sees it, war is itself a form and consolidation of hierarchical social organization.

Another arsenal nature uses to consolidate social cohesion and the commitment of individuals to distinct and mutually hostile social groups is what Bergson calls “static religion.” The term “static” designates the feature of a natural religion that is unchangeable because it is made of beliefs inherent in the human psyche. The beliefs emerge from a special

function, “the myth-making function,” which produces representations that are fictitious but vivid enough to impersonate facts, and hence “to masquerade as perception.”⁵⁹ In assuming a factual appearance, the representations speak the language of facts to which an intelligent being is always receptive. In addition to this persuasive power, the representations evoked by the myth-making function have the noteworthy attribute of not impeding the exercise of intelligence. As is the case with obligation, the function is another substitute for instinct, given that a recourse to instinct would obviously obstruct the latitude of choice necessary for intelligent behavior. Unable to employ the instinctive procedure and yet compelled by its nature to support intelligent beings, the *élan* of life resorts to hallucinatory representations instead of inducing directly behavioral compliances. The myth-making function is, therefore, instinct but in a virtual state: as such, it forfeits the power to determine in favor of suggestions counterfeiting facts with reassuring or correcting representations.

A crucial application of the myth-making function is to handle the representation of death. While in the case of animals the impetus of life constantly overwhelms the representation of death, the case is different with human beings, whose intelligence cannot but deduce the inevitability of death from sheer factual observations. This representation of death could be so depressing as to stifle vitality and eradicate the sense of effort unless a reassuring counter representation emerges from the myth-making function. In effect, “to the idea of inevitable death she [nature] opposes the image of a continuation of life after death.”⁶⁰ This function of the natural religion goes beyond reassuring the individual; it provides society with a powerful weapon to consolidate social cohesion and the commitment of individuals to the social order. Indeed, it protects the continuity of the social order by fostering representations of dead ancestors in the form of ghostly appearances, with the consequence that infringement arouses their wrath and compliance gains their support. Later, the representation takes a more developed form by moving from ancestors to gods with their power to punish or reward. In this way, the obligation by which intelligence is compelled to suppress its egoistic tendencies in favor of sociability is provided with the powerful vision of supernatural forces defending the social order.

This analysis of obligation and natural religion can be disconcerting if one loses sight of the reason why Bergson appeals to nature or the *élan* of life. After all, an account of the same phenomena strictly based

on empirical and observable causes would be more convincing. For example, take the Marxist explanation of social order by classes and the conflict of their material interests. In this case, the social order derives, not from the constraint of the vital impulse, but from the subordination of the common people to the material interests of the ruling class and from the political forces and ideological beliefs designed to protect those interests. This derivation of the social order from the dominance of the economic interests of the few over those of the many brings out “empirically and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production.”⁶¹ In appealing to the causal impact of an intangible notion like the *élan* of life, not only does Bergson—so Marxist critics would say—hardly avoid mystification, but he also attributes a determinist bearing to what is just a translation in conscious terms of the antagonism of classes, namely, moral obligation and religious beliefs. This transfer of causal power from the material conditions of life to the superstructural components of social life, which is typical of idealism, does no more than show that the *élan* is just a new term for an old and discredited method of thinking.

As is typical with a materialist approach, the Marxist explanation tacitly presupposes what it means to explain or generate. Granted, as Marx wants us to believe, social cooperation derives from the necessity of humans to produce their own material life. Nevertheless, the reverse thinking is equally possible, namely, that material production is itself nothing more than a means to actualize the organizing work of life by imposing a cooperative mode of existence. In this case, the primary cause is organization and material production its implementation. Bergson has sufficiently insisted on the fact that humans are intelligent to the extent that they are sociable, given that cooperation is an intelligent method and that intelligence owes its success in shaping nature to its cooperative mode of existence. It is because to act intelligently is to act socially that Bergson says, “social life is thus immanent, like a vague ideal, in instinct as well as in intelligence.”⁶² Moreover, the class organization of society strongly suggests that society continues the organizing work of life. Unless obligation, that is, the structure of command and obedience is already present, no social order of any kind is likely to take root and grow. In fact, one can venture to say that the universal and proven method of the class organization of society demonstrates that it is a heightened expression of the structure of the natural society.

This is all the more true as class structure liberates intelligence from being swamped in the day-to-day activity for the satisfaction of basic needs. Both the progress of intelligence and the government and management of an expanded society require the liberation of a section of that society from the everyday preoccupations for the sheer sustenance of life, which is precisely effected by the division of society into classes. Long ago, Aristotle said it in the most cutting terms: "if each tool could perform its task on command or by anticipating instructions ... if ... shuttles wove cloth by themselves, and picks played the lyre, a master craftsman would not need assistants, and masters would not need slaves."⁶³ There is no denying that humans invent, but they do so in the context of tendencies provided by nature. In other words, class rule presupposes the innate disposition that Bergson calls "obligation in general."

When an unjust social order is understood as the result of the loss of the original equality and freedom of human beings, as is the implication of the contract theory, or of their original communal nature, as conjectured by Marxism, the persistence of this social order, especially through the obedience of the victims themselves, turns into an incomprehensible mystery, unless one adopts the view of the natural superiority of those who rule. Precisely, the genius of the Bergsonian approach is to dismiss the genetic superiority of rulers through the defense of human political dimorphism while at the same time providing the biological basis for the emergence of an order of command and obedience. The order furnishes the structure, the skeleton; human invention supplies the muscles and the rest. To use another illustration, imagine an empty place and a podium with an empty throne: it gives you the picture of the mental setup underlying all types of social organization.

Another crucial implication of the Bergsonian theory of a natural society is that it exposes the precarious nature of human progress. In posing an innate, unchangeable structure of social organization, Bergson intimates that any social change, no matter the ideality of its inspiration, is bound to mingle with the configuration of the closed society. Moreover, the postulation of a natural structure of command and obedience points to the magnitude of the obstacle that social evolution faces and the unusual means required to bring about change. Since real change cannot rely on nature, it requires, as already suggested, nothing less than the involvement of forces going beyond nature. Be it noted that the setting of an unremovable structure derives from Bergson's opposition

to the idea of a hereditary transmission of acquired features, a position argued at great length in *Creative Evolution*. Consequently, the human that came out of the hands of nature still lays within the modern person and can resurface at any moment of history if adverse conditions arise. Accordingly, what we call progress is not so much removing the natural as covering it with acquired characteristics. To say so is to go against both evolutionism and the belief that there is a radical difference between the modern person and its earliest ancestors.

Sociological studies defined the early ages as the primitive stage of humanity and gave a description based on the belief that the so-called non-civilized peoples are the closest specimens of that primitive stage. For Bergson, however, the use of the evolutionary term of stage goes astray from the start, since it fixates on what evolves to the detriment of what does not change. Despite appearances, the so-called primitives are actually far removed from the natural human owing to the addition of a host of acquired features accumulated during a very long history. The natural is not the non-civilized; rather, it is "an archaic structure, an ensemble of elementary tendencies that is always actual."⁶⁴ Just as the reconstruction of the natural human by extrapolating the features of the so-called primitive people is a misguided attempt, so is the theory of a radical distinction between the people designated as "primitives" and those who are said to have evolved into modern humans. Bergson's position is made explicit through his criticisms of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who forcefully defends the assimilation of the primitive mentality to a mentality that remained the same because it did not evolve. In addition to strengthening the belief that today's "primitive" peoples are the nearest representatives of the original nature of the human species, the assimilation leads to the conclusion that the modern human being is radically different from its primitive version. Lévy-Bruhl speaks of "two mentalities" that are "foreign to one another" to the point that the primitive mentality can be characterized as prelogical, mystical, as opposed to the logical nature of Western thinking.⁶⁵ Since Bergson rejects the hereditary transmission of acquired characteristics, the assumption that a different mentality has emerged in the course of human history is for him anything but credible. What is more, it leads to a mistaken conception of human evolution both in regard to its direction and to the nature of the force inspiring the improvement. The unfortunate consequence is none other than a naïve acceptance of the idea of progress.

OPENING THE NATURAL

In encountering the resistance of matter, the current of life reaches a limit and then changes direction, again butting up against another limit and again shifting direction, and so on and so forth. As the shifts signify differentiations rather than stages in a linear evolution, each limit or stoppage yields a species of life defined by a specific nature. Though the human being represents an advanced specimen, it is a stoppage like any other species since, in addition to being subjected to obligation, human intelligence is itself a specific function obtained through the virtualization of other functions, for instance, instinct. Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre's contention that "there is no human nature" because "only the totality of choices we make in life makes us the people who we are," Bergson posits a human nature and understands freedom not so much as choice but as effort, the effort to transcend our natural limitations (see Chapter 3).⁶⁶ Granted that for both of them freedom is self-creation, the absence of a received condition turns Sartre's idea of freedom into an arbitrary choice. By contrast, since for Bergson there is a context of limitation, freedom is to grow, to remove our fences, more exactly to pierce through the wall of nature. The whole issue is to know how this growth is realized.

We have already excluded the possibility of realizing this progress through a cumulative and linear process. Such a conception of human advancement simply overlooks the qualitative difference between the closed and the open moralities, difference often perceived as contradiction and made comprehensible through a dialectical form of thinking. Yet, the perceived contradiction ceases to be one if the two moralities are assigned to two different sources, each having a distinct objective. What we have then is not a resolution of contradiction, a synthesis, but a coexistence, as a result of which the open morality, though unable to untie directly the knots of nature for the simple reason that the structure of the natural society is unremovable, nevertheless exerts influence on the closed society. In proposing two qualitatively distinct sources, Bergson could neither consent to the derivation of the one from the other nor be content with a mere mixture of the two moralities without encountering the difficulties of dualism. Indeed, the issue of morality is no different from the problem of knowing how the spiritual acts on the material while remaining qualitatively distinct. As we saw in the previous chapter, Bergson tackles the problem of the union of mind and body by

replacing the alleged causal relation with a temporal relation, to wit, the synchronization of pure memory with the present of the body. This temporal adjustment allows the actualization of the impalpable memory as memory-images thanks to the sensations occasioned by habit-memory. In this case, nothing is properly cause or effect; nor is there any ontological amalgamation: there is simply a process of signification, of cognitive suggestion in a context sketched by a sensorimotor occurrence.

The lesson here is that we should understand the relationship between the closed and open moralities in the same way, that is, neither as causal nor synthetic, but as inspirational. To do so maintains the qualitative difference of the two sources; it also derives the result of the inspiration from coexistence rather than from the incarnation or progressive realization of the ideal. To use an imperfect yet illustrative parallel, the two moralities stand vis-à-vis each other as Plato's World of Forms relates to visible things: the Form is the universal model, the inspiration (Plato's reminiscence) that remains distinct because it cannot be embodied in the visible world. Bergson offers an idea of the nature and mode of operation of the open morality when he says that it "expresses a certain emotional state" so that "we yield not to a pressure but to an attraction."⁶⁷ He preserves the distinction from the pressure of nature precisely by calling the inspiration, the source "mystical." The mystical transcends the natural and manifests as an emotional state the impact of a lure. Clearly, the mode of operation of the inspirational is quite distinct from the determining effect of a cause or the materialization of a potentiality. Before analyzing the emotional state, let us make sure that our grasp of mysticism is in conformity with Bergson's view.

We go astray if, following the prevailing opinion, we view mysticism as nothing more than a religious phenomenon. Without denying their close relationship and even their mutual influence, Bergson rejects the reduction of mysticism to religion by underlining that "religion is to mysticism what popularization is to science."⁶⁸ This means that far from religion generating mysticism, it is mysticism that uses religion to propagate its message. This should not come as a surprise. Since we already saw that there is a natural religion aimed at strengthening social cohesion and countering the depressive effects of intelligence, it makes perfectly sense to assume that mysticism inserts its message into this natural religiosity, thereby fostering advanced religions like Christianity or Islam. In adapting to the natural religion, the mystic message will inevitably be tainted with anthropomorphic images. Thus, what defines Christianity is that the

mystic message of universal love blows through a body of beliefs borrowed from the natural religion.

The autonomy of mysticism from religion is inscribed in the distinction between the dynamic and the static, which we know are inseparable aspects of the vital *élan*. While religion expresses the *élan* of life as a stoppage, mysticism manifests its dynamic aspect. Insofar as the static represents an interruption, it does not exhaust the *élan* in that it leaves a residual with an itching to overflow. This residual signifies the mystic because it captures the fundamental oneness of life beyond the division of the *élan* into closed species, not merely as a conceptual notion, but also as the felt embrace of love. However, the itching is not strong enough to carry the whole human species beyond the stoppage. In default of being able to break the obstacle by impulsion, the best it can do is to attract by the medium of privileged individuals. Bergson speaks of "an impetus, which had ended in closed societies because it could carry matter no further along, but which later on is destined to be sought out and captured, in default of the species, by some privileged individual."⁶⁹ Note that the notion of privileged individuals does not introduce any discrepancy. For a philosophy that conceives the brain as a limitation for the purpose of practical life rather than as a manufacturer of thoughts, the occurrence of very rare but happy anomalies allowing some individuals to have access to what remains virtual for the rest of humanity is within the range of possibility. Add to this that the rejection of teleological and dialectical conceptions of history leaves an opening for the role of privileged individuals. Once the idea of the realization of a plan is rejected and human life is viewed as a stoppage, from where else could a forward movement originate if not from deviant personalities, which are like momentary distractions of nature? Still, we should keep in mind that the conversion of impetus into attraction via privileged individuals loses the biological force of generating a new species in favor of an inspiration that ignites the spur of emotion just enough to awaken momentarily a dormant inclination of universal love in human species. Given the extreme rarity and briefness of mystic inspiration, progress depends on how successfully it is translated into institutional arrangements.

In vouching for its autonomy from religion, Bergson lays the groundwork for the philosophical usage of mysticism. Other than the less credible charge of mere fraud, the only argument left against the usage is the interpretation of the anomaly of mysticism as a form of insanity. Without

denying the apparent similarity of mystic visions and ecstasies with morbid states, Bergson argues that the noted similarity has nothing to do with an unhealthy state of mind for the reason that action defines the true mystic, as shown by the creation of lasting religious movements and the endurance for uncommon ascetic practices. As Lawlor notes, “if we define mysticism as action, then we can distinguish the frenzy of mysticism from what he [Bergson] calls ‘charlatanism’.”⁷⁰ The capacity to act is reflective of an equilibrium that is unreachable to deranged people in view of the fact that insanity is, precisely, the loss of contact with reality. Both the defense of its autonomy from religion and its standing as a superior mental balance rather than a lack of it show that Bergson wants to treat mysticism more as a fact than a supernatural phenomenon. Its abnormality is due less to its occult origin than to its exceptionally intense degree of intuitive ability, the very ability that Bergson endeavored to develop into a philosophical method. So conceived, mysticism becomes a powerful auxiliary of philosophical research. “Disengaged from all visions and dogmas and taken in its pure state,” it enables the philosopher “to handle in an empirical manner problems which must otherwise remain insoluble,” one of them being the existence and nature of God.⁷¹ The use of mysticism makes philosophical research empirical because reasoning relies on the experience of God’s presence instead of proceeding in a purely abstract and deductive manner.

While standard perception externalizes objects, the mystic experience manifests itself through an internal state of intense emotion. The latter results from the exceptional level of intuitive effort that experiences the dissolution of all walls, including that of the ego. As Idella Gallagher puts it, “it is the emotion of a soul that is breaking out of the circle which encloses it both within itself and within its particular society, a soul struggling against the bonds of nature and the inertia of matter to take its place on a higher plane of existence.”⁷² Yet, what is said here does not exactly indicate why mysticism is the driving force of social changes. How does Bergson pass from the emotion experienced by the mystic soul to social dynamics? The answer is the contagious nature of the mystic emotion, particularly attested by the transformation of the natural religion into religions advocating universal love. Besides appealing to all, the true mystics “find followers, and thus they prove that in our soul there is a potential force, however embryonic, that goes beyond the tribal mentality toward human fraternity.”⁷³ It is through its action on religion that mysticism affirms and proves the efficiency of its

impact on social change. In modifying religion, it reaches a mass audience by impinging on an aspiration that is crucial to most human beings. Nothing is weightier to human beings than what reaches them via their longing for the meaning of life.

An objection comes to mind: what about the highly shared view that human progress has been achieved by neutralizing religion? Even if one resents calling religion “the opium of the people,” one cannot deny that, for instance, we owe modernity to the separation of church and state. Though the objection appeals to historical facts, the conclusion that is drawn, namely, the characterization of religion as a force antithetical to progress, is mistaken. The objection does not pay attention to the Bergsonian concept of two distinct sources: there is what inspires and there is the effort to translate socially the inspiration. Naturally, not only does the translation fall far short of the inspiration, but it is also inevitably used to fuel the structure of the closed society by manipulating religious beliefs to justify wide-ranging social inequalities and abuses of power. Ironically, even when social movements take a pronounced anti-religious direction, their description of the projected new society is tainted with religious accents. Such was the case of the French Revolution and the more recent revolutions inspired by Marxism. They all mimicked mystic emotions and goals as though they were merely substitutes for the void generated by the dismissal of religious beliefs. In this regard, Alexis De Tocqueville’s observation is most enlightening. The French revolutionaries, he writes,

did not doubt in the least that they were called to transform society and regenerate our species. These feelings and passions had become a kind of new religion for them, which, producing some of the great effects which we have seen religions produce, tore them away from individual egoism, encouraged them to heroism and devotion, and often make them seem insensible to all the petty goods which we possess.⁷⁴

That regenerative and generous emotion is in play is hardly unexpected in view of the character of the vital *élan*. What best denotes the action of an *élan* if not the sense of elevation, of breaking the moorings that tie us to the ground? As said earlier, unlike sentiments inspired by natural desires, emotion does not aim at specific objects; it is, as Bergson defines it, “an affective stirring of the soul.”⁷⁵ As a stir, it is not reducible to rational considerations, either. The stir initiates a movement of

ascension tingling with creative impulses and moving away from the path of rational accommodation as well as the pursuit of a specific thing. In other words, the feeling of soaring is exactly what an *élan* should induce and it is none other than the creative spur to self-overcoming, to going beyond the closed circle of nature. While it is true to say that Bergson ranks sentiment above reason when considering the issue of the source of morality, one must add that the feeling in question is the special nature of emotion as motivator of self-transcendence. We observe here the point of inflection between Bergson and Immanuel Kant: for the former, if the open morality is how we emancipate from egoism and the constraints of the closed society, then it can only originate from an uplifting emotion, not from the pressure of a rational commandment. The issue is about opening what is closed, of being creative and experiencing a new sentiment about humanity, less so about conformity to an imperative. As a matter of fact, any form of pressure is uncalled for since an individual uplifted by emotion ceases to offer resistance. Accordingly, viewed from the vantage point of mysticism rather than the viewpoint of intellectual reconstruction, moral progress occurs “when some exceptional moral nature has created a new feeling, like a new kind of music, and passed it on to mankind, stamping it with his own vitality.”⁷⁶

The driving role attributed to mystics and great leaders has been criticized because it seems to write off the decisive input of social movements in the generation of social changes. Thus, against Bergson, Louis Pinto proposes “to abolish the social/individual distinction by showing that ‘great men’ are defined, not by singular features, but by the social forces that they embody.”⁷⁷ First, the criticism seems to underestimate the strength of social conservatism, the resistance to change, in assuming that the pressure of social conflicts and frustrations is enough to engender the desire for change. Though undoubtedly protests and uprisings are necessary, a vision is needed to overcome the resistance to change. Under pain of repeating the same structure, change must be inspired by a vision indicating some degree of emancipation from the structure of the closed society. Second, Bergson ties change to the “call of the hero” because for him change is creation, and not the progressive realization of a goal immanent in the social process, as is the case for all those theories locating the source of change in the conflict of social forces. The concept of the hero denotes those mystics and other leaders who, having broken down the gates of nature, invite their fellow humans to join them. That they find a great number of followers should inform critics

that Bergson does not ignore the input of social movements in changing society. People do not follow mystics because of their supernatural power or anything that looks like an imposition, but because they find in themselves the echo of the emotion lifting the open soul. As Bergson asks, “if a word of a great mystic, or some one of his imitators, finds an echo in one or another of us, may it not be that there is a mystic dormant within us, merely waiting for an occasion to awake?”⁷⁸ Let us agree, then, that Bergson avoids a one-sided approach by conceiving social change as the product of the reciprocity binding privileged individuals and their society.

What was said so far sufficiently confirms that Bergson appeals to emotion because he poses the problem of moral and social progress in terms of opening the closed, of overcoming resistance. Neither reason, nor the progressive trend of history, not even natural sentiments can break down resistance because they all operate within the confines of nature. What is needed is the overflowing force of emotion: it cracks resistance because by nature it is not confinable. That is why, to explain the role of affectivity, we must go beyond the argument that “to become ‘effective’ (*agissante*), an idea must be able to take hold affectively, thereby creating a desire for its own realization.”⁷⁹ We must add that the sentiment in question must be wild and immoderate enough to crack what appears as natural. It must be equal to a mystic feeling or to what a mystic can propagate, for instance, to the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Only when reason and natural feelings (self-love, kinship, sympathy, etc.) have been impregnated by the mystic emotion of universal love that they side with the open morality. Take the case of the ancient Greek civilization. Despite great advances in morality, it could not question the practice of slavery. The latter became unacceptable to reason and repulsive to our sensitivity following the influence, and that after notable failings, of the new sentiment of universal brotherhood generated by Christianity. In addition, history shows that the initiators and leaders of social movements against inequalities and mistreatments came from the upper classes. In default of being able to explain the assumed leadership in terms of material or class interests, what else could explain it—at least partially—but the lure of the message of love spread by mysticism? In light of the tenacious and innovative campaign of the mystic message against nature, it is no exaggeration to say that the longing to “make of it [humanity] a new species, *or rather deliver it from the necessity of being a species*” defines mysticism.⁸⁰

The more we appreciate the unnatural direction of mysticism, the more we understand that the experience of a pure and unlimited love must be the source of its message of universal love. To the extent that mystic love is not of this world, it posits nothing short of a transmundane experience of love, that is, of God as both love and object of love. According to Christian mysticism, love is not just an attribute of God; rather, “God is love, and the object of love.”⁸¹ For Bergson, this identification of God with love is the great and distinct service that mysticism provides to philosophy. It allows philosophical reasoning to go beyond the abstract determination of God as the uncaused first cause or in pantheistic terms. True, referring to his own statement that the creative “effort is of God, if not God himself,” some critics (see Chapter 4) have accused Bergson of proposing an impersonal notion of God on the grounds that the stated identification does not support the separation of the creator from the created world.⁸² One such critic is Emmanuel Levinas, who detects in Bergson’s thought a tendency toward “an impersonal pantheism.”⁸³ As previously argued, not only does the finiteness of the vital *élan* hardly agree with any attribution of a pantheistic leaning to Bergson, but also the endorsement of the mystic notion of God as love and object of love definitively excludes pantheism. The fact that at the same time God is love and the object of love confirms that God is a person. All the same, a word of caution is in order: one must avoid any anthropomorphic representation by assuming that God is a person as a human being is a person. When applied to a human being, the term “person” denotes individuation and hence limitation and finiteness, features that obviously do not apply to God. Nonetheless, the mystic determination of God as love denotes the availability of a relational engagement. It follows that the only way to reconcile the infiniteness of God with the nature of a person is to say that God becomes a person through a love relation. By initiating a relation, mystic love actualizes what is but virtual, namely, God as a person, a view that Bergson underlines by saying that “God needs us, just as we need God.”⁸⁴ In the lucid words of Ghislain Waterlot, “the human person or something resembling the human person is necessary as an instrument for the creative emotion to express itself in a particularized and fully conscious way; the human person is needed for God to blossom and manifest as a person.”⁸⁵

The mystic vision of God as love and an object of love, in addition to making sense of the existence of the universe, perfectly accounts for its separation from God. Both to become an object of love and to love, God

needs a universe that is autonomous: a purely determined world is little propitious to the gestation of a relationship, let alone a relationship of love. Likewise, the appeal to mystic vision enables Bergson to go beyond the conclusions of *Creative Evolution* establishing that God “is unceasing life, action, freedom.”⁸⁶ Unceasing action means that God did not create the world once and for all; on the contrary, creation is continuous, so that new worlds are constantly added to the universe. The supersession of the notion of God as life by the mystic vision of God as love accounts for the unceasing creation as manifestation of unlimited love. Another advancement has to do with the issue of survival after death. We already know that static religion induces the belief in survival to deflect intelligence from the depressing certainty of death. With the notion of God as love, the idea of survival transitions from a functional notion to an inference of a love relationship. It adds to what philosophy has been able to ascertain, namely, the independence of memory from the body, the prospect of a completely independent existence, even though “we still remain imperfectly informed of the conditions of the after-life, and especially regarding its duration: is it for a time, or for all eternity?”⁸⁷ I hasten to add that for a philosophy of self-overcoming, the idea of death, of termination introduces a discordant note in that it goes against a tacit implication of self-overcoming. The affirmation of an insurmountable boundary means that life has overcome all kinds of obstacles only to succumb to the inevitability of death. Rather than endorsing such an unsurpassable limit, is it not more consistent with the nature of self-overcoming to assume that life is an open-ended phenomenon? So apprehended, life incorporates the possibility of continuous metamorphoses, of uninterrupted qualitative changes in pursuit of “endless progress.”⁸⁸

OVERDETERMINATION AND PROGRESS

As already underlined, the qualitative distinction between the two moralities is that the open morality neither springs from the closed morality nor constitutes its enlargement. Thus, that the love of humanity is not a mere extension or a product of the love of one's family or community sufficiently tells us that the relationship between the two moralities is bound to be complex and inadequate. Granted the extreme difficulty of inserting what is limitless into a fenced group structure, the fact remains that the only way mysticism can have a lasting and transformative impact is by infiltrating the closed society. The infiltration

effects the sociopolitical transformation of the closed society by means of legal and institutional innovations that tend to promote human rights and a democratic government. It follows that the closed society does not exist in a pure state; it combines closure with some openness. The necessity of a mixed society derives from what we have already stated, namely, Bergson's refusal of the transformation of acquired characteristics into hereditary traits. The rejection entails that the natural cannot be removed and that the message of love of mysticism has no other choice than to reach a *modus vivendi* with the natural society.

That moral and sociopolitical evolution cannot come about through the development of natural morality admittedly makes the idea of mixture inevitable. Yet, as already indicated, the idea remains an obscure notion, as it is not clear how two qualitatively distinct things could blend to form a single unity. Calling the outcome a synthesis does not remove the problem so long as a combination between qualitatively different elements is supposed to take place. On the other hand, the Bergsonian approach has what is needed to provide a viable solution, the very one used to correct dualism. An example is the idea of justice. Bergson shows that justice progressively evolved from its original meaning of proportion in the exchange of goods to a requirement of equivalence between injury and compensation. One cannot shift from the idea of proportion to justice as the affirmation of the unconditional value of the human person by dilating proportionality: it requires a leap made possible by the spread of the mystic love of Christianity. We see here how what is without limit injects itself into the closed and overloads it, just as memory overcharges the now of perception with memory-images to the point that perception turns into an occasion for remembering (see Chapter 6). The image of the inversed cone in *Matter and Memory* illustrates how perception is overlaid with layers of memory so that the union of mind and body is not so much a combination as a relation of overdetermination. Unlike the idea of mixture, overdetermination does not compromise the original qualitative distinction as it translates into a durational relationship where memory adopts various degrees of condensation to insert into the narrow scope of perception, thereby overdetermining it. That the relationship between the open morality and the closed morality is one of overdetermination and not of amalgamation is shown by the evolution of the idea of justice. To translate the mystic idea of the absolute value of the human person into legal terms, there is no other means than to overdetermine the natural idea of justice. That is why the modern idea of

justice still retains the idea of proportion while simultaneously signifying the incommensurable value of the human person. The constant inadequacy of the legal expression triggers the effort to improve it by inventing new forms of legalization without succeeding to translate adequately what is absolute in the language of proportion.

Overdetermination is how self-overcoming works when it deals with the narrow scope of the living body or with the fixed features of a species. It overflows, generating a situation where the limited says or contains more than its actual feature, as in the example of modern justice signifying more than mere proportionality. In other words, the open morality is not an expansion of the closed society; nor is there a transition from the one to the other resulting in some mixture. Instead, there is a leap spread by a new emotion that opens consciousness and causes a dislocation between what ought to be and the already-made. Since the dislocation is due to the fact that the content overflows the container, it triggers the movement to adjust the form to the overcharged content. But because what is limitless can never be confined within the limited, the container, however ingeniously contrived, always remains deficient. While it is absolutely necessary to stabilize the mystic inspiration by institutional innovations, the outcome is flawed because institutionalization is a stoppage of what is essentially movement. More importantly, the invented form can never replace the natural owing to the impossibility of changing acquired features into innate dispositions. Consequently, reversal is always a possibility: a serious crisis or war can result in the eruption of the natural, suddenly plunging the most "civilized" nations into barbarism. A good example of this is the reversal caused by the two most destructive world wars.

Since the species essence of human beings posits an ineradicable nature, skepticism about the reality and extent of progress seems to be in order. Nonetheless, it is one thing to advocate caution about progress, quite another to deny it altogether. Granted that no preexisting goal drives human history, granted that the mystic does not erase but simply surpasses or overdetermines the natural, leaving intact the possibility of the resurgence of the closed mentality, the fact remains that progress is not just a mirage. Notable improvements have occurred in the conditions of people's lives, as well as in the recognition and protection of human rights. The correct position is to admit these improvements while acknowledging that these acquired openings must be constantly reconquered under pain of being dissolved by the closed mentality. If the

natural never goes away, then the effort to open it, better yet, to leave it open must never cease. Again, we see the importance of effort in the philosophy of Bergson: not only is effort required to open the closed, but that the effort is not for one time only, given that nothing is acquired definitively. Had human history been an unfolding process in pursuit of a goal, the part played by effort would have been minimal. It is a different matter when advancement results from opening what tends to close automatically. In such a case, effort plays the crucial part in addition to being constant.

Another complication surrounding the notion of progress in Bergson's philosophy is his understanding of the method of evolution. As we saw with biological life, instead of following a linear and cumulative path, evolution proceeds by dissociation along divergent lines. The different species of life as well as the great divide between animal and vegetative forms of life originate from the divergent movement of life. There is no reason to assume that the evolution of society would be different so long as we do not lose sight of the natural character of social life. However, in one aspect a difference appears: as nature "has at command an incalculable number of lives ... she preserves the different tendencies that have bifurcated with their growth."⁸⁹ Such is not the case with social life. The different tendencies must remain together in the course of evolution instead of evolving separately as different species of life, as in nature. Therefore, no other alternative seems available than to develop the tendencies one at a time, thereby effecting "progress by oscillation."⁹⁰ We have to keep in mind that alternation in society is different from a cyclical process or a pendulum type of movement because it "is endowed with memory."⁹¹ So that, what is achieved by the unilateral growth of one tendency is not lost when the tendency swings back: it is taken up by the tendency whose turn it is to develop. For lack of a better illustration, Bergson uses "the image of a spiral movement": the picture of a gradually widening, overflowing curve around a narrow center comes close to what is meant by overdetermination.⁹²

The necessity of developing successively tendencies that otherwise constitute a totality indicates that social change is not a harmonious and balanced process. Since one tendency develops by holding back the other tendency in the same unit, which is then a complementary tendency, the notion of progress must be taken in a very qualified sense, particularly as immoderation drives this form of development. It also means that development is never comprehensive, since alternation entails that

one tendency always lags behind its moderating tendency. According to Bergson, in addition to the “law of dichotomy,” social evolution obeys the “law of twofold frenzy.”⁹³ Evidently, the term “law” must be taken in the loose sense of inclination rather than ineluctability in view of the fact that it operates in a context in which human freedom and choices are participants. The rationale for the dichotomy is easy to grasp: the split is necessary because the tendencies cannot develop in their blended unity. The fact that they belong to the same unit means that they are complementary so that the one naturally moderates the other, the only way they can constitute a whole. In developing in isolation, the one tendency loses its moderating component, thereby engaging in a frenzied course. To be sure, the tendencies could have developed together, but the change would have been quite mediocre and would have ended quickly. Only through the frenzy made possible by alternation could each tendency give “the maximum of creation, in quantity and in quality.”⁹⁴ Unavoidably, the exclusive character of this frenzy generates its own limit after some time and so allows the complementary component to develop, in its turn, in the same intemperate way. The threat of some disaster or the accumulation of deep crises are usually indications that a frenzied course has reached its limit. Bergson credits intemperance for the maximum of creation for the reason that the frenzied course compels each tendency to grow not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Indeed, the tendency held in abeyance must develop in such a way that it can measure up to the situation generated by the intemperance of the complementary tendency.

According to Bergson, European history illustrates and validates this “law” of social development. A case in point is the one-sided pursuit of industrialization in Europe after the no less immoderate otherworldliness of the Middle Ages. In both cases, we have excesses, but also one tendency growing thanks to the ebbing of the other tendency. Note that it is an ebb and not an opposition, which would be that of dialectics developing a trend at the expense of the opposite trend. The unrestrained pursuit of material comfort and luxury defines industrialization, while excessive asceticism and worldly indifference apply to the medieval times. Interestingly, Marx’s commanding theorization of the capitalist society on the basis of the primacy of the drive for profit tallies with Bergson’s description of modernity. Notably, the subordination of the political and cultural components, what Marx calls superstructure, to the economic basis can be interpreted in the Bergsonian terms

of social imbalance. By extension, the notions of dichotomy and frenzy give a hint as to why Third World countries have such great difficulty in modernizing. Unlike capitalist countries, they do not seem eager to engage in a frenzied course of material conquest. Instead, they mix traditional features with imported modern elements, the outcome of which is the blockage of the full development of capitalism. According to the neo-Marxist school known as the mode of production approach, underdevelopment does take place when “peripheral social formations are constituted by the articulated combination of the dominant capitalist mode of production, and subordinate, non-capitalist modes of production.”⁹⁵ Another possible application of the “law” is the recurrent scenario of revolutionary movements engaging in the course of radical change only to reverse direction toward conservatism and authoritarianism. The disruption of the social order necessary to implement far-reaching changes and the subsequent threat of anarchy naturally invite a reaction revaluing law and order.

Despite the difference with the notion of struggle between opposing tendencies, some critics did not hesitate to conclude that the law of dichotomy and double frenzy is simply a replay of dialectical movement. A critic even suggests that the “replica” could be a “parody of the Hegelian dialectic.”⁹⁶ At the cost of repeating a point already discussed, let me say in complete agreement with Ondřej Švec that “for Bergson, to consider history as a logical deployment, be it a dialectical one, would amount to denying both the reality of time and the creation of unforeseeable novelty.”⁹⁷ Any notion of history coined in terms of pursuit of some goal, as implied in dialectics, is not reconcilable with Bergsonism because it sees time as unfolding, realization, less so as invention. Moreover, as already established and repeated a little while ago, the evolutionary process is not linear for Bergson and, in the case of society, it proceeds by ebb and flow. To assimilate such a process to the struggle of opposites is a misreading: immoderation is not synonymous with strife. True, the fact that in society, unlike nature, the tendencies do not evolve separately but remain in the same unit, could justify the interpretation of their relationship in terms of opposition. For Bergson, this interpretation is attractive, not because of its veracity, but because humans like drama. That is why they relish describing history in terms of “a struggle between two parties, two societies or two principles, each of them in turn coming off victorious.”⁹⁸ In reality, there is no struggle.

The method of divergence operating within the same unit obtains the maximum development, not as a result of a struggle, but because each tendency “leaps forward and monopolizes the available space, while the other is on the watch unceasingly for its own turn to come.”⁹⁹ In other words, instead of dissociating the tendencies, the movement of divergence deactivates, turns off one tendency to give the whole space to the other until it reaches its limit and vacates the space for the tendency on hold. Divergence proceeds like the bodybuilder who works out each arm at a time because isolated exercise of one arm—which precisely avoids opposition—gives a better result.

When disclosing the fundamental law of social development, Marx writes, “from forms of development of productive forces ... [the production] relations turn into their fetters,” we would be inclined to detect a process of development by oscillation were it not for our fascination with the drama of oppositionality over time’s potential of advancement by turn.¹⁰⁰ It is indeed about duration, because what is more expressive of time than what comes back by totalizing and thus is memory? The realization that the complementary tendencies of production and distribution cannot develop hand in hand does not turn them into opposites; rather, it invites the understanding that distribution must lag behind to allow the free development of the complementary tendency. The retard of distribution by the medium of class ownership of the means of production, to the extent that it allows the generation and appropriation of surplus production, does give free rein to the development of the productive forces. However, at a certain stage, this same one-sided development invites the updating of distribution so as to enhance needs and consumption to the level reached by the increased productive capacity of society, under pain of causing severe crises due to imbalance. And, as in the case of society, the pendular movement is endowed with memory, the updating of distribution cannot be a simple catching up, a rearrangement of the old social system: it calls for a creative orientation because the availability of increased means provides a larger bedrock for the infusion of new emotions of mystical nature into the structure of the closed society. This overdetermination is how social revolution or, which is the same thing, qualitative change takes place. As we saw with the evolution of the idea of justice, the change results from existing social relations and institutions lagging behind the new found meanings and requiring a creative overhaul to synchronize with the new inspirations.

PROBLEMS OF MODERNITY AND THE REVALUATION OF VALUES

The refusal of the linear and naïve notion of progress should lead to a sober assessment of modernity, especially to a clear understanding of what is required to deal with its serious problems. If war as well as hierarchical and closed social organization are natural, then the availability of a military technology whose destructive capability is without limit gives the full measure of what humanity is facing as a result of modernization. The point is to understand that, since we are already engaged in a frenzied course, the continuous increase of material power can only feed on the frenzy. Thus, in conjunction with the unabated production of destructive weapons and the danger of a general conflagration, there is the no less drastic development of “the concern for comfort and luxury” into “the main preoccupation of humanity.”¹⁰¹ This concern leads to a continuous multiplication of needs, given that as soon as one need is satisfied another emerges that is as imperious as the previous ones, all the more so as “the desire to have more than others and be above them” is impelling us.¹⁰² The fact that needs have no limit is just another incentive for internal as well as external conflicts.

To the extent that luxury and comfort procure pleasure in themselves but also via the social recognition that they provide, they disclose “the aphrodisical nature of our whole civilization.”¹⁰³ By this, Bergson means not only that we pursue objects that give us pleasure because they satisfy some natural needs, but that we want pleasure for its own sake so that pleasure has become an end in itself. A typical illustration of this is sexual pleasure. Divorced from its original function of procreation, sexual pleasure “has become the goal or end of sexuality.”¹⁰⁴ In the same way, the widespread and growing craving for substances inducing euphoric states reveals the intensity of the chase of pleasure for pleasure’s sake. The consequence is that pleasure is raised to the level of meaning, of what one expects from life. For Bergson, this promotion denotes an attempt to fill a void, the very one caused by the receding authority of religion in favor of that of science. Once doubt, however small, creeps into the promises of religion, the only way to counter the perceived absurdity of life seems to be through a life gorging itself with pleasure. Referring to the plunge of humans into “the leaking jar” of pleasure, to use a Socratic image, Bergson writes, “we should not cling to it so desperately, did we not see in it so much ground gained over nothingness, a means whereby

we can snap our fingers at death.”¹⁰⁵ A civilization that erects pleasure as a goal of life in order to fill a spiritual void is, by definition, propelled by an insatiable desire. This endless goal of pleasure does no more than increase the possibility of conflicts over resources and the distribution of wealth. Clearly, the quest of pleasure, luxury, and comfort as life’s goals would not have been possible without industrialization, since it is the increase of their material power that enables humans to pursue pleasure instead of toiling for mere survival.

Another dire consequence of the unlimited desire for comfort, luxury, and pleasure is what the contemporary world has acknowledged as a major problem, namely, the serious damage to the ecosystem caused by a frenzied form of industrialization. Rectifying the lack of recognition of Bergson’s contribution in the field of environmental protection, P. A. Y. Gunter rightly argues that his “thought provides a strong basis for environmentalism.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, many of Bergson’s ideas provide relevant materials for the elaboration of environmental ethics. To mention some of them, his opposition to the mechanical conception of nature in favor of a durational approach, as reflected in his famous statement that “the universe endures,” is an invitation to see nature as an indivisible living reality. Likewise, no conception gives a better sense of the preciousness of the outcomes of the evolution of life than his interpretation of evolution as a creative process resulting in the generation of unique and unpredictable forms of life. In addition, creative evolution proceeds by divergence and complementarity, and so institutes between living beings a chain of solidarity that hardly upholds the human tendency to consider nature as a means manipulable at will. According to Bergson, all the more reason for humans to drop the tendency is that they are not thrown into this world, as implied in dualistic philosophies. Nor are they an accidental outcome, as proposed by materialism, given that they owe their existence to a creative effort of the entire nature. Neither superimposed from outside nor accidental, humans are the immanent product of the same vital *élan* that generated nature, and so should behave as the guardians of nature. Their assumed “superiority” as thinking beings became possible thanks to the devolution of complementary functions on other forms of life. Bergson gives a striking vision of the solidarity on which the human relied to become a thinking being in a statement already cited: “all the living hold together, and all yield to the same tremendous push. The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality.”¹⁰⁷ Reversing the long-held view in the West urging humans

to become “masters and possessors of nature,” as Descartes puts it, Bergson invites us to view the human as just a native of nature and, as such, indebted to it. Lastly, the denunciation of the stimulating effect of the unlimited pursuit of comfort, luxury, and pleasure on expansionism, competition, and the warlike spirit completes the repertoire of rich materials that Bergsonism has at its disposal to formulate a comprehensive environmental ethics.

From the exhortation to preserve the biodiversity of nature to the recognition of and respect for human diversity, the passage is logical but also ethical. In this regard, no concept can give us a better grip on the fundamental dynamics and conflict of the contemporary world than the Bergsonian notion of closed and open society. While economic forces unlocking national borders persistently consolidate the trend toward a global market and the promotion of international organizations, counterforces of cultural nature fight to safeguard the previous exclusions, partly to defend themselves against the Western—in particular American—economic and cultural hegemony, partly because of their attachment to their particular identity. That instead of accelerating uniformization, globalism seems to provoke reactions that even take fundamentalist forms in some places turns the handling of diversity in a world whose material basis is no longer confined within specific borders into a defining issue of our time. Failure to handle properly the problem of diversity is so threatening to world peace that Samuel Huntington’s characterization of our time by the term “clash of civilizations” gained wide academic attention.¹⁰⁸ Now to present Bergsonism as a champion of human plurality could appear as a deliberate distortion designed to give it some postmodernist veneer. For instance, is it not true that the *Two Sources* systematically opposes primitive peoples to the civilized nations of the West? And what about Bergson’s characterization of Christian mysticism as superior to any other form of mysticism? More importantly, is not Bergson deriving identity from the act of closing up and, in so doing, is he not defining it in a negative way? Such a definition of identity is hardly compatible with a philosophy committed to valuing particularism.

Granted all the above and more, the fact remains that Bergsonism is antithetical to the defense of uniformity and sameness. For a philosophy that hails creativity and movement, which are expressed by uniqueness and novelty, any uniformization amounts to a cessation of creative endeavor. Moreover, for a philosophy that rejects the linear and

goal-driven conception of history, “no people, no civilization are constituted as models to follow,” since any civilization follows a particular course and that the historical process is divergent rather than convergent.¹⁰⁹ As to identity as a locking act, not only is it inevitable but it is also expressive of differentiation inherent in any creative act. The point is to keep in mind the distinction in kind between the closed and open morality. It means that any attempt to derive the open morality from the closed one is a deception, as is the case with the Western claim of ownership of Christian mysticism. While the message of Christ is obviously addressed to humanity in general and not to the West in particular, the Western claim completely distorts the message by confining it to a particular place and tradition. In thus attributing to the message an exclusionary intent, it turns pure openness into a closed mentality. The Western attempt to spread Christianity all over the world, no doubt laudable in its intention, was mishandled because it propagated not the authentic message but its western version. No wonder it served as a vehicle to impose the West’s cultural and economic hegemony, notably by justifying colonization as the benevolent mission of removing savagery through the tutelage of Christian values and beliefs. The Bergsonian approach is different for the reason that it brings into play mysticism as overcoming. In other words, within Bergson’s distinction between closeness and openness and his view of mysticism is embedded the notion that life generates, it is true very sparingly, men and women that are great because they transcend their society. These great benefactors belong to no one but humanity, even if they use the language and culture of the society in which they are born.

The above problems of modernity are all fallout of industrialization and the paradox is that, according to Bergson, “industrialism itself ... springs indirectly from it [mysticism].”¹¹⁰ The relation is indirect because the invention of machines is natural to human intelligence, as shown by the fact that ancient societies have invented machines. Whereas in pre-modern societies machines were just curiosities, modernity used them for material production. Now, it may seem as if the otherworldly orientation of mysticism would counter rather than support industrialism. Such was indeed the case with Oriental mysticism. For example, both in China and India, mysticism remained too contemplative, focused as it was on the pursuit of deliverance or ecstasy. Different is the situation when mysticism is spreading the message of an active universal love, as is the case with Christian mysticism. Deliverance is sought but

in an entirely new sense than renunciation, which is for humanity to use machines to rise above the necessity of being a species. In addition to being condemned by their animal nature to feed on other living creatures, humans have come to define their worth as individuals in terms of the superiority or inferiority of their social statuses. Since what stands in the way of universal love is that humans prey on each other, it is not far-fetched to assume that a message of active love could inspire the conquest of material power so as to prevail over materiality. In Bergson's words, "the mystical summons up the mechanical."¹¹¹ What clouds our understanding of the mystic inspiration of machines and industrialization is the deviation imparted by their capitalist usage, that is, the pursuit of "exaggerated comfort and luxury for the few, rather than liberation for all."¹¹² On the other hand, the constant social protests against the flagrant inequalities of the capitalist system remind us that people have a more correct understanding of the mystic function of industrialization than the apostles of capitalism, even if it is true that the incentive of private profit was necessary to the vigorous development of industries.

Before further examining the concrete remedies that Bergson suggests to attenuate the problems of modernity, let us make sure that we follow a course of thinking consistent with the key notion of this study. In this regard, there seems to be an inflection. On the one hand, the problems of modernity, be it ecological degradation, recognition of particularism, or expanding social inequalities, together with their potential for initiating armed conflicts, are studied as downsides of an immoderate course of material development; on the other, the imposition of restraint is presented as a viable solution. Yet, in light of the main thesis of this study, to wit, the self-overcoming and triumphant march of life, the idea of imposing limits on what is impelled by self-overcoming does not seem to be a consistent proposal. Either the thesis is not correct or the concept of limit itself must be a function of self-overcoming. As underlined in previous attempts to articulate the concept of overcoming, the latter alternative is obviously the path of consistency: overcoming presupposes limitation. What this means is that the pursuit of a frenzied course cannot be coined in terms of overcoming. It does result in accomplishments that can even be qualified as great, but such accomplishments are essentially quantitative, being nothing more than outcomes of an unfolding course. They are neither creative nor impart a change of direction. To acquire the characteristics of creativity, they must overcome an obstacle, which is also how they surmount the frenzied course and change

direction. Only then is there overcoming and, in particular, self-overcoming if the limitation is internal, as in the case of life overcoming its own descent or materiality or the open morality endeavoring to unlock the gates of the closed society.

Since the problems of modernity emanate from the disequilibrium of closed societies resting on an expanded material base by industrialization, what is called for is self-overcoming, that is, the *élan* that takes us beyond the immoderate pursuit of comfort, luxury, and pleasure. To prevail over one's intemperate pursuit is to change direction by overcoming an internal craving. Bergson conceptualizes this solution by directional change as "a return to simplicity," which, he says, is "not a certainty" in that it depends on the will of humanity.¹¹³ It is thought as a return because the expectation is that its spirit will revive a mode of life impregnated with an asceticism akin to that of the Middle Ages. Just as medieval asceticism was inspired by an ardent belief in the promises of religion, so too modern asceticism will require a similar belief in the continuation of life after death to nurture some detachment from the craving for gratification. However, there is a major difference between the two forms of asceticism. In the medieval case, asceticism expressed indifference to worldly life as a way of surmounting adversities, which indifference was essentially caused by the human inability to master the material conditions of life. The case is different with modernity: thanks to the development of science and technology, modern societies not only vanquished most of the adversities, but they also engaged in the path of unrestrained pursuit of comfort and luxury. In this last case, asceticism means not so much indifference to mundane life as a recovery of control over one's frenetic desires.

In suggesting the radical solution of an ascetic path, Bergson cannot but provoke disbelief, the main reason being the overriding gains of an apparently irreversible worldliness. Undoubtedly, the belief in life after death that backed medieval asceticism still persists, in one form or another, among a great number of people in the modern world. But, as a besieged belief, it is no longer enough to prevail over the seductions of modernity—even in the unlikely event that it would be renewed by a new mysticism. To say so, however, does not remove the need to put on cap on the frenzied nature of modernity, a task that cannot be achieved without some spiritual renewal. Those philosophies that, having killed God, tried to give meaning to life—I have particularly in mind the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche—had to find a substitute for religion,

be it communism or the Dionysian justification of life. Bergson backs the possibility of a spiritual renewal of humanity by suggesting that science can become a great ally if scientists, finally grasping the metaphysical foundation of their materialist method and credo, overcome their present mistrust in “psychical research” and engage in a serious endeavor to study scientifically paranormal phenomena.¹¹⁴ Moreover, as already suggested, Bergson does not advocate the dropping of industrialization, which would simply replace one frenzy by another. He simply proposes the impregnation, more exactly, overdetermination of industrialism by institutions and values reflecting mysticism. The impregnation means that our pleasures remain, but “they would pale like our electric lamps before the morning sun.”¹¹⁵ In giving us some control over the frenzy of material pursuit, these values and institutions will go a long way in reducing social inequalities, the consumerism that undermines the ecosystem, and the longing for hegemonic expansion into the territories of others.

Given that the return to a simple life, though possible, is hard to realize owing to the aspiration and addiction to a life of comfort and pleasure, not to mention the weakened power of religion, the best that humanity can do to avoid war and annihilation is to design some reliable safeguards until such time it is ready to cross over into a new mode of life. Bergson makes this position quite clear in a rejoinder to a commentary on *The Two Sources*. He writes, “the means to an essential reform, according to me, is not ... psychical science, not even the ‘waiting for a hero’, but some opening of the closed, a certain direction imparted to the will to neutralize the fundamental human being.”¹¹⁶ A crucial component of this strategy by means of reform rather than a radical change of direction is the expansion and consolidation of the democratic spirit and institutions, all the more so as “democracy is evangelical in essence and that its motive power is love.”¹¹⁷ Of all political institutions, democracy “is the furthest removed from nature, and its values move in the direction ‘contrary to nature’.”¹¹⁸ In contrast to the proponents of contract theory, democracy is not, for Bergson, an institutionalized continuation of the natural equality and freedom of human beings; on the contrary, equality and freedom emanate from an inspiration that works to unshackle the chains of the natural society.

The inspiration stems from the unconditional love for humankind, the very one spread by mysticism, especially by Christian mysticism. Given that this love is in principle beyond any institutional expression in that

it reflects the mentioned Augustinian precept of "love and do as you will," it must reach some compromise with the unremovable structure of the closed society in order to have any concrete and lasting impact. Democratic intuitions represent the never-ending, always imperfect effort to overcharge the closed society with some echo of mystic love. As a result, a democratic society still retains the political order of command and obedience, but relieves it of its natural rigidity and absoluteness. It counters absolutism by making political power accountable to the citizens, thanks to inclusive and decentering institutional mechanisms (election, majority rule, division of power, etc.). Likewise, the declaration of inalienable human rights is an attempt to give a political and legal expression to what is an object of unconditional love and, as such, essentially beyond any right. When the pure emotion of love translates into a political institution, it becomes a rational notion by adopting the language of rights and duties, of laws restricting or obliging everyone else.

The attempt to insert the unlimited into the limited cannot help but generate constant internal frictions. Thus, individual freedom tends to produce social inequalities, just as equality tends to restrict freedom. Yet, freedom and equality are two complementary rights, obvious as it is that people are really free only if they are equal and they cannot be equal unless they are autonomous. We recognize here one of the defining debates of modernity, namely, the debate between capitalism and socialism, the former favoring freedom, the latter emphasizing equality. Because pure freedom and equality cannot be injected into the structure of the closed society without mutually hindering their respective development, the only solution left is to develop them one at a time. But, as we saw, when a tendency is developed separately from the complementary tendency, the outcome is intemperance, one-sidedness. The outcome makes clear the impossibility of building a true democratic society without the support of asceticism. So long as the desire for comfort, luxury, and pleasure is unchecked, individuals and classes are antagonists and the possibility of developing freedom and equality in a harmonious way is anything but achievable. Put otherwise, the return to a simpler life conditions true democracy because only where temperance prevails is it possible to reconcile freedom and equality.

Given that the return to simple life is a remote possibility, there remains, in default of pure democracy, the achievable path of improving existing democracies by means of interventionist states whose task would be to correct the inequalities as well as other excesses that the free

market and the aphrodisiacal orientation of modernity inevitably generate. In light of the nature and irrevocability of the closed society, it is plain that progress depends on reforms introduced by interventionist states. Democracy cannot rely on a *laissez-faire* state; it needs the mediation of a “constraining power,” that is, of a state that “has the power to intervene legitimately.”¹¹⁹ Bergson gives us a concrete case of state intervention when, dealing with the danger of overpopulation to the safeguard of peace, he proposes that the state should “impose more or less heavy taxes on every supernumerary child.”¹²⁰ He goes even further by calling for the establishment of what looks like a world government. The latter does not dissolve existing states, but will have “the authority to intervene in the legislation of the various countries, and even perhaps in their government” to solve global and international issues, notably when the issues are a threat to peace.¹²¹

For Bergson, a powerful ally in consolidating democracy and curbing the aphrodisiacal orientation of modernity is the liberation of women. This feminist tone derives from the perception that protracted social inferiority has compelled women to define their worth by their ability to please men. Nothing proves better the intensity of this need to please in order to value themselves than the consecration of a whole industrial sector to the production of beauty products. In conquering equality with men, women lose the need to measure their worth in terms of how well they please men. The net result of this is that “what woman demands in the way of luxuries in order to please man, and, at the rebound, to please herself, will become to a great extent unnecessary.”¹²² This revolution will have the far-reaching consequence of transforming men themselves by reducing the social appeal of manliness. Because inequality marks out women by submissiveness and dependency, to show manly behavior became a quality that they appreciated in men. The valuation of manliness led to the contempt of whatever is considered as effeminate, as opposed to the approbation of assertiveness, dominance, toughness, warlikeness, etc. Blaise Pascal nicely combined the aspect of women seeing themselves as trophies and men responding as victors in his famous aphorism: “Cleopatra’s nose, had it been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have been changed.”¹²³ Gender equality is, therefore, the democratic advancement that is most efficient in reducing the frenzied pursuit of luxury and pleasure.

In both assigning rights and allowing people to defend them, democracy goes a long way in reducing social inequalities, thereby somewhat

reverting industrialism to its original social purpose. The rights also temper the hierarchy and the absolute nature of political power characteristic of the closed society. The total effect of these tempering acts is that it strengthens resistance against the rush to war because the accountability of political power to the people and the democratic handling of external as well as internal conflicts make recourse to violent solutions less likely. As Kant remarks, "in the case of a constitution where the subject is not a citizen of the state, that is, in one which is not republican, declaring war is the easiest thing in the world, because the head of state is not a fellow citizen, but rather the owner of the state."¹²⁴ In addition to protecting peace and directing industrialization toward social needs by promoting equality, the progress of democracy offers the possibility of reducing the damages of industrialization to the ecosystem. As long as industrialization serves the purpose of private enrichment and the social system allows glaring inequalities and, subsequently, the unchecked pursuit of pleasure and luxury, nothing decisive and lasting can be done to protect the environment. Again, pending the resurgence of an ascetic will, the best that humanity can do is to devise by means of interventionist states, better still, an empowered global body, correcting measures decreasing the negative effects on the ecosystem.

The preservation of peace depends as much on the expansion and consolidation of democracy as it does on the recognition of human diversity. As previously emphasized, Bergsonism perceives diversity as the very manifestation of the creative nature of life, just as it accepts universalism as the inherent attribute of life's effort to overcome its own limitations. The problem here is that the mystic inspiration of democracy cannot have an impact unless it adopts the contours of the closed society. Accordingly, no sooner does the society open up than it closes again so that the progress of democracy does not go to the extent of including humanity. At best, it covers a national space precisely by excluding other people, all the more easily as they adhere to a different religion, have different customs, speak another language, or have different physical appearances. What is more, the exclusion can reach the level where one culture considers itself as universal while the others are just inferior stages or abnormalities. Bergson's rejection of the linear notion of history and his distinction between closed and open society invalidate the claim of universality by any given culture because its very distinction is proof of its closeness. By definition, mysticism transcends any culture, and so excludes the attempt to derive it from the particular. At the same time,

this same transcendence implies that it has to manifest by the medium of a particular culture under pain of having no grip on the real society. In the insightful words of Nadia Yala Kisukidi, “if the appeal to the universal takes form in a particularity, it is to respond to the imperative of diffusion, not to signify that one particular mode of life and thinking is in principle universalizable and hence superior to others.”¹²⁵ This separation of the inspiration from its cultural expression exposes the fallacy of the claim of universality by a given culture.

The distinction between the inspiration and the cultural expression does not entail the separate existence of the former, in the manner of a Platonic Idea; nor does it mean that the particular is a deformed appearance of the universal or a stage in its realization. Rather, it indicates that the connection between the particular and the universal is one of articulation or alignment, and that once it is admitted that no particular culture is identifiable with the universal, the problem of human diversity can be seen as being no different from the way the closed and open societies articulate. Consequently, neither the universal dissolves the particular, nor the particular turns into the universal, nor is there a mixture, a synthesis between the two. Also, let us not forget that the universal is revealed through the medium of privileged individuals whose transcendence from insularity make them the intermittent and tenuous links binding the human dispersion into closed societies. The universal is thus an inspiration overdetermining the particular so that particularity, instead of being merely exclusion, becomes an identity overspilling with “the desire for openness, specifically the desire *to be open toward openness*.”¹²⁶ In other words, it overloads itself with a state of mind, an attitude that has no border because it is not just open to this or that, but instead is open to openness. Such an identity is still identity but one that acknowledges other identities to the point of welcoming their particularism. Unless recognition goes to the extent of including alterity, it does not overcome sameness, and hence closeness. The inclusion of alterity means that the other is not just a mere version of the same, but incarnates the originality and irreducibility manifesting the creative attribute of life. As such, it denotes the impact of love since it treats different peoples as they want to be treated. How else could love show its impact but by inspiring the effort to overcome one’s narrowness and ethnocentric limitation?

One could see some parallel between the change that some contemporary theoreticians conceptualize as “glocalization” and the Bergsonian interaction of closeness and openness. Viewed through the Bergsonian

lens, a glocal state of mind retains the attachment to a local identity, and so counters the rise of the global culture that proponents of globalization confidently announce on the ground that globalization works toward the uniformization (Westernization) of the various cultures. However, the attachment to locality is qualitatively different from the chauvinist attitude because its infusion with a mystic inspiration relativizes it, more exactly, instills the sense of its limitations, thereby dissipating the xenophobic ethos of the closed society. When a breath of mystic inspiration passes through a narrow framework that is irremovable, the best it can do is to impart a state of mind that is open to openness. As Bergson puts it, “between the closed soul and the open soul there is the soul in process of opening.”¹²⁷

To sum up, one last point should be made. Bergson’s apparent crusade against the pursuit of pleasure and comfort and his call for the social regulation of industry have earned him the criticism that his social philosophy proposes nothing else but “a Communist-style Puritanism.”¹²⁸ The criticism is blind to the fact that Bergson wants humans not so much to turn their backs on the pursuit of pleasure as to overcome it so as to be worthy of the higher level of joyful existence. As pointed out in Chapter 4, joy is not a mere gratification of some natural desire; it is victory over the natural, the reward for an accomplishment, the revelation that a limitation is overcome. In short, it conveys the sense of elevation because it is felt where creative freedom unfolds.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Beyond accounting for the two sources of morality and religion, Bergson's last book delivers the ultimate secret of life. It does so by integrating the input of mysticism, namely, the revelation of the universe as a love venture. What is remarkable here is the convergence between what philosophy discovers by itself and the insight of mysticism. Indeed, the method and characteristics of self-overcoming perfectly fit with what love is supposed to want. God's desire to love and be loved does not just continuously create, but it also wants to create beings worthy of that love. And this means essentially creating free, autonomous beings in a universe left to itself and managing by itself, that is, a universe animated by a creative energy that is expressive of love. As Bergson puts it, "beings have been called into existence who were destined to love and be loved, since creative energy is to be defined as love."¹ Accordingly, the universe that love animates is a striving Being, one that endeavors to triumph over its own self, to draw from itself more than its original endowments so as to be worthy of God's love. In a word, the universe is essentially a creative effort.

This effort is manifested by the reality of an enduring universe, given that duration is productive of effort. To the question of why everything is not given all at once, of why there is succession, the only answer that makes sense is that invention takes place in the universe. Since the time of invention does not simply unfold what is already given, it is properly defined as duration in that the past prolongs into the present, thereby initiating a gestation, a being in the making. In contrast to the undoing time, that is, to the time that passes, the time that endures is itself

effort and, hence, inventive. On the other hand, the condition for the deployment of creative effort is the presence of obstacle, but such that the obstacle is itself a moment of the effort and not merely a distinct and removable external impediment. Contrary to what an external obstacle can yield, an internal resistance breeds a process of self-creation. We recognize here the vital *élan*, the direction of life overcoming its own inversion, to wit, materiality. In becoming the effort to inverse its own necessity, not only does life transcend itself but it does it in such a way that new living beings, and not automatons, are called into existence. This free gift of life is consistent with an undertaking inspired by love.

To be more specific, the inversion of materiality is just an attempt and never an actual accomplishment for the reason that the self-induced reversal of life as materiality is also how life is trapped within necessity and becomes finite.² Unable to stop the trend of materiality, the best it can do is to retard it, the consequence of which is that it actualizes itself as *élan*. The instantaneity of necessity thus retarded, this gain of time gives an enduring universe allowing the accumulation of energy and its usage for free movement. Hence the division of the organic world into plants and animals: plants store solar energy and animals spend it for free movements. This same strategy of retarding necessity is at the root of the invention of the brain and the nervous system, whose function is to retard the reactions of the living body to the actions of the external world, thereby changing those actions into possible actions. This transmutation of necessity into choice actualizes consciousness as perception of the external world. The fact that the living body becomes a distinct center leads one to think of the movements of the sea bringing ashore precious products, with the major difference that said products are created, not premade.

Now, suppose that one of the products that reaches the shore continues to grow while constantly unrolling at the same time. It necessitates a duplication whereby the part that grows overflows the part that unfolds. The duplication yields the being-made, or that which is rolling through a delayed unrolling. This overflowing is exactly how, through the action of memory, perception grows into the self-consciousness of a being in the making. The unity between mind and body is thus a constant synchronization by which the mind limits itself so as to be attentive and useful to the present of the body. Moreover, since the bringing ashore occurs through individuation, it limits the individual to his/her own self, which by any measure means an extremely narrow and survival-focused life.

Hence the necessity of a collective life: it compels individuals to surpass their individuality through a commitment to a transcending social order. However, the order being established by the formation of closed societies, it calls for the mystic, that is, for the renewed effort to unify all the arrested fragments of life in the direction of “getting back to God.”³ The mystic closes the ontological circle of love, the circle of God’s need to be loved by beings worthy of His love.

Talk about God and mysticism goes a long way in strengthening the views of many critics charging Bergsonism with deep conservative and irrational underpinnings parading as a novel and revolutionary philosophy. As noted in the Introduction, the noticeable resurgence of Bergsonism after a period of virtual extinction, which was itself preceded by a period of wide popularity, is indicative enough of a bewilderment toward the whole philosophy. On the one hand, Bergson’s philosophy reveals a thinking that is perfectly logical and attentive to facts, in addition to being well informed of the then current scientific theories and discoveries. On the other hand, it incorporates without any embarrassment items that philosophers usually consider as irrational, such as intuition, emotion, mysticism, paranormal phenomena, etc. This anomaly explains the split between those who reject the entire philosophy on the grounds that it rests on “irrational” premises and those who domesticate the thinking by interpreting it in terms that are congruent with classical dualism. There is, it is true, a third group—a prominent representative of which is Gilles Deleuze—that wrestles to point out the originality and groundbreaking nature of Bergson’s philosophy. In light of the recent resurgence of Bergsonian studies, this third school is showing signs of success. The lesson of this topsy-turvy history is that dealing with Bergsonism will remain difficult so long as our approach overlooks the requirement to put aside familiar concepts and modes of thinking, notably our usual oppositions, such as the opposition between the rational and the irrational, matter and spirit, intelligence and intuition.

Among the suspension of usual oppositions, the decisive one, that which gives the key to Bergson’s philosophy, is the discarding of the opposition between being and nothingness. As argued in the previous chapters of this study, even Bergson’s conception of time as duration signifies nothing other than a conception of time excluding the not yet and the no more. Bergsonism is a philosophy of plenitude; it has no place for nothingness and the negative. To think being without non-being is to conceive reality as self-producing, auto-generating reality. For such a

conception, being does not unfold; instead, there is creation of being. The present is not what passes, but instead the present endures, prolongs itself. Movement and change do not fill gaps or realize what is potential or possible. Everything is full and whatever happens results from auto-creation, which denotes self-expansion rather than the filling of a gap. Bergsonism expels nothingness because it excludes discontinuity and juxtaposition in favor of continuity. Where there is continuity there is fullness whose movement and change can only be its own continuous metamorphoses.

In a reality conceived as self-creative, there are no terms but only provisional stoppages. Whereas the being that is full of holes is vainly chasing after its own completion, the being that is full creates, not out of lack, but out of plenitude. In so surpassing, going over its limits, the being is revealed as a striving being that knows no terminus. If one truly thinks that life is driven by the need to overcome itself, to go beyond limitations, then it is contradictory to assign a final terminus to life, whatever that terminus may be. To assign a final limit is to block the process of life by an absolute negative and whose consequence is that life itself becomes a vain struggle against the forces of death. As indicated in the previous chapter, for a philosophy that detects in life a self-overcoming drive, the human is not an end but the halt that must be overcome, put back in movement. Then, is it really surprising that modernity, with its need to fill the void generated by its metaphysical disillusionment and the death of God with the promotion of subjectivity as an end in itself, has trouble understanding a philosophy that considers the human as a stoppage? As P. A. Y. Gunter notes, it is no accident that Bergson's decline "was due primarily to the emergence of phenomenology and existentialism," whose distinctive feature is the primacy accorded to subjectivity.⁴ We get a full picture if we add Marxism and its enduring and wide influence on the manner social issues are articulated. Bergson's appeal to mysticism at a time when powerful social movements were pressing for changes could not but appear as a reactionary stand. In other words, a fluctuating fate is no wonder for a philosophy that is at odds with established norms of thinking.

Assuming that Bergson's recent revival is not just a passing fashion, is it wise to conjecture that it announces the coming of a time finally ready to think beyond the negative? The answer to this last question is a whole different matter because Bergson's characterization of issues involving negative ideas as pseudo-problems gives a portrait of human life that

humans hardly recognize. When human life is ceaselessly frustrated by the passing nature of time and a host of negative occurrences, the assertion that nothingness and negation have no objective significance seems to miss the real determinants of human life. However, as argued in Chapter 5, the distinction between the ontological and psychological levels grants to human sufferings and setbacks the status of being subjectively reel while placing their occurrences in a reality that is objectively devoid of negativity. In this way, their reality at the subjective level does not impinge on the absence of negativity at the ontological level. Thus, as we said in the same chapter, the difference with existentialism is not that Bergson denies the reality of human sufferings, but that he does not accord them the function of revealing the nature of being. Instead, this function goes to the positive feeling of joy because joy rhymes with creative accomplishment, and so reveals the essence of life as self-overcoming. In going beyond the negative as well as the useful and the pleasant, we reach joy because we participate in the great saga of life, to wit, life sporting with itself to surpass itself.

NOTES

1. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan, 1935), 233.
2. I remind the reader that the reversal does not amount to a negation since life and materiality are just different levels of duration.
3. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 221.
4. P. A. Y. Gunter, "Bergson and Sartre: The Rise of French Existentialism," in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 233.

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